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Richard Tristano  
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# /Black Religion in the Evangelical South/

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# Preface

In the early stages of my research I resolved not to attempt to define either black religion or the black church. Because this is an introductory essay, I thought I would retain the ambiguity of these terms and deal with them in their widest possible sense. I still hold that opinion, but would like to offer a few words of explanation helpful to the reader.

By *black religion* I mean the common religious experience of all Afro-American people. I have not excluded native African religion or other non-Christian elements of that experience, though I have always assumed that in the United States black religion has been and still is overwhelmingly Christian. I acknowledge that many scholars would choose to emphasize the rich diversity of black religion, or perhaps would prefer to concentrate on a specific state or locality, or to study a particular denomination. I do not dispute these approaches at all and only point out that I have chosen instead to emphasize the broad commonality of the black religious experience. A problem does emerge when in the context of a broad emphasis certain exceptions are made. For example, I shall not discuss black Catholicism at all. A cogent argument could be made against this decision. I shall respond by stating clearly that this essay is intended as a complement to an earlier publication on Southern (white) evangelical religion.<sup>1</sup> Both studies are intended as general introductions to Southern religion; neither claims to examine Southern religion in all its diversity but rather seeks to concentrate on Baptists and Methodists who make up a large majority of Southern Christians, both black and white. The black Catholic, Pentecostal, Holiness and other traditions are not omitted because they are unimportant but rather because they deserve separate and detailed study.

The *black church* could be defined as the historically all black denominations. However, this would exclude members of all black or mostly black congregations which belong to predominantly white religious bodies. It seems unjustifiable to exclude these groups from the black church. I would tend, therefore, to define the black church in cultural, ideological, perhaps even theological terms, including all members of churches (and mosques) of African descent whose worship is consciously or unconsciously significantly influenced by blackness. This is certainly a very loose definition which would include all but a very few Afro-American church members.

My choice to use the term "black" was an obvious one, since it is clearly the word preferred by most blacks today. "Colored" is a term used by a generation which is fast dying out, and "Negro" is disliked particularly because whites often mispronounced it as "Nigger". Afro-American is preferred only by the black elite and academicians. Not so obvious, perhaps, is my choice to use verbatim slave narratives in some of the quotations. I have made this choice because the narratives are historically accurate, they add a flavor of reality to the thought expressed, and they do not attempt to make black people sound like middle class white Americans.

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1. Richard Tristano, *What Southern Catholics Need to Know about Evangelical Religion* (Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1984).

Donald Mathews has suggested a periodization of black religious history as follows: 1760-1820, the establishment of popular religion and the first efforts to convey it to blacks; 1820-1845, from Vesey's conspiracy to the sectional split in the evangelical churches; and 1845-1870, in which the establishment of free black churches after emancipation vindicated slavery for white evangelicals.<sup>2</sup> Mathews himself notes that this division is purely the mental construction of whites.

Another more detailed periodization has been formulated by Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson.<sup>3</sup> They begin with a Slavery Epoch which they date from 1750 to 1859 and continue with a Civil War Epoch (1860-1865), a Post-Civil War Epoch (1866-1899), a New Century Epoch (1900-1914), and a Migration Epoch (1915-1930). Since they were writing around 1930 we could continue in the same vein with a Depression Epoch (1930-1945), a Second Migration Epoch (1945-1955), a Civil Rights Epoch (1955-1965), a Rise of Radicalism Epoch (1965-1975), and a Post-Radical Epoch (1975 to the present). This schema has the virtue of identifying all of the various factors which affected the black church. It is, however, not detailed enough in the beginning and too detailed thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

A suggested compromise periodization might be as follows: (1) *The Apostolic Age (1750-1790)*, characterized by the retention of certain elements of West African culture, the growth of evangelicalism in the South, the first efforts at converting blacks, and the age of the greatest anti-slavery feeling; (2) *Development of the Invisible Institution and the Black Independent Church Movement (1790-1830)*, marked by the dissolution of anti-slavery feeling and increased accommodation to slaveholders; (3) *Reaction (1830-1865)*, including a movement to proselytize the slaves as a means of social control following the Nat Turner revolt, greater material benefit to slaves, and an increase in restrictions on their freedom; (4) *Consolidation of the Black Church after Emancipation (1865-1915)*; (5) *Migration and Diffusion (1915-1955)*, characterized by strains within the black church caused by the diffusion of Southern, rural, black Christianity; (6) *Civil Rights and the Black Power Movement (1955 to the present)*, marked by the rise of the non-violent black protest movement under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and by the development of radical protest.

This schema, though not perfect, recognizes both the persistent influence of religion in the black community and the transition black religion has experienced in the past two centuries. It takes account of white influence, which was very powerful in the last century of slavery, and of other historical factors, yet recognizes that black religion and particularly the black church is an organic manifestation of the black experience. The schema, however, should not be overemphasized; it is offered only as a very general framework within which to study black religion.

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2. Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p.208.

3. Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), reprint of 1933 ed., pp. 20-37.

4. See also the Preface by Charles H. Wesley to the reprint of Carter Woodson's *The History of the Negro Church*. (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1972), reprint of 1921 ed.

# Introduction

ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING characteristics of Southern religion is that both its black and white forms developed in the same geographical area, both are constituted by an overwhelming majority of Baptists and Methodists, yet they are so different.

In a recent Gallup survey, 77 percent of blacks identified themselves as Protestants in a national preference poll.<sup>1</sup> Of that 77 percent, two-thirds identified themselves as either Baptists or Methodists, the typical Southern configuration.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, on a particular Sunday morning in Atlanta, Georgia, the organization of the service at First Baptist (white) and Ebenezer Baptist (black) may seem very similar. Both services would include hymns (some different, no doubt), prayers, the recognition of visitors, the reading of Scripture, the Sermon, the Invitation and the Benediction. Both churches are, after all, Baptist and share a similar tradition. These similarities can easily deceive the casual observer into assuming that black Protestantism and Southern white Protestantism are essentially identical.

The resemblance between Southern white religion and (Southern) black religion is certainly an important fact. However, despite these points of resemblance, it is an essential assertion of this essay that because the black experience in the United States has been so fundamentally different from the experience of whites, black spirituality represents a separate and unique phenomenon. Gayraud Wilmore has depicted the difference between white and black religion in what might be shocking terms. It is a concept that not everyone, not even all blacks would accept, but it does point out the need to begin to think in terms which extend beyond white Christianity: "The radical faiths of Malcom [X] and [Martin Luther] King coalesce in the opaque depths of black spirituality that is neither Protestant nor Catholic, neither Christian nor Islamic in it's essence, but comprehends and transcends all these ways of believing by experiencing God's real presence in the search for justice, by becoming one with God in suffering, in struggle, and in the celebration of the liberation of all humankind."<sup>3</sup>

The identity of black religion is derived, first of all, from the fact that blacks, as Africans, brought with them a cultural heritage which differed from the one brought by white Europeans. Moreover, blacks have created their own American subculture formed out of their unique experience in the United States. The most heinous institution imposed on blacks was slavery, a force which dominated all relationships between blacks and whites. The motivation of many evangelizers, particularly slave masters, extended beyond their desire to Christianize, to an effort to render their slaves more docile and thus to better preserve slavery. This certainly was often the result of Christianization, though just as frequently Christianity nurtured an inner strength in the slaves which encouraged an array of reactions ranging from prayerful inner defiance to armed insurrection. Whatever the individual

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1. *Religion in America, 1984*, The Gallup Report No. 222 (Princeton, NJ: The Princeton Religion Research Center, Inc., March, 1984), p.44.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 45. Fifty-five percent identified themselves as Baptist, and 11 percent as Methodist.

3. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), p.191.

result, collectively, religion became the major psychological battleground between slave and master, and functioned as the only form of self assertion for blacks under slavery. After emancipation, religion continued to exert a powerful influence on black culture. Blacks continued to be subordinated to and separated from white society so that the "Negro church" functioned as the "social center" of black life.<sup>4</sup>

Black religion has been often viewed as rudimentary. Certainly the historic educational disabilities imposed on blacks must be recognized. Forcibly kept illiterate under slavery, after emancipation provided with second class educations, and deprived of most professional jobs except the ministry, black religion was necessarily more experiential than some other religious experiences. But to construe black religion as simple is to ignore, for example, the subtleties of the spiritual, and more importantly, to misunderstand the crucial importance of religion and the Church in the black subculture.

The nonsystematic Christianity of blacks has often been perceived as evangelical and other-worldly.<sup>5</sup> But blacks have not attributed the same significance to evangelicalism as whites have.<sup>6</sup> Certainly blacks have not shared the European heritage of the Reformation from which modern evangelicalism has sprung. Moreover, for example, the literalism of the Negro preacher John Jasper was based on a profound faith in the truth of the Bible rather than on any scholarly exegesis. The complex reality is that deprived of the ability to read Scripture, blacks developed a strong oral tradition and an emphasis on a faith held deeply in the heart, which nonetheless embodied an abiding respect for the Bible. A missionary behind Union lines heard one freedwoman testify:

'Oh! I don't know nothing! I can't read a word! But, oh! I read Jesus in my heart, just as you read him in de book' and drawing her forefingers across the other palm, as if tracing a line: 'I read and read him here in my heart, jest as you read him in the Bible. O. . . my God! I got Him! I hold him here all de time! He stay with me.'

Similarly, black religion was otherworldly in its affirmation of an ultimate justice beyond time and space, but there was also the recognition that blacks were helpless to change their circumstances. Religion provided the individual with spiritual strength and self respect, while the church, as a gathering of the faithful, provided the race with social, educational and organizational contact, and an agency of social welfare. Unlike white religion, black religion could not be separated from everyday life since blacks had little else to rely on. Therefore, although black Christianity held out the hope for a better life after death, it was simultaneously concerned with the problem of survival in a cruel and unjust world. The profundity of black religion reflects the complexity of existence in a hostile world.

In sum then, the following chapters flow out of an appreciation of the unique contribution that blacks have made to American Christianity. Having established that black religion is different from Southern white religion, the influence of African religion and the institution of slavery are suggested as two explanations why this is so. The early development of black religion is traced, noting some of the formative influences. Some of the major themes of black religion are summarized as a means of better defining the differences between white and black religion, and the importance of the organized church in the black experience is assessed. Finally, the last chapter attempts to integrate into black spirituality some recent developments in black society and thought such as the Civil Rights, Black

4. W.E.B. DuBois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," *The Souls of Black Folk, Essays and Sketches*, chap. 10 (first pub. 1903), reprinted in Hart Nelsen et al. eds., *Black Church in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 32.

5. Wilmore, p.227.

6. William H. Bentley, "Bible Believers in the Black Community," in David Wells and John Woodbridge, *The Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), pp. 128-141.

7. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion, The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 242.

**Power and Black Theology movements. Each of these movements is examined in the context of the historical radical strain in black religion, all by asking the general question whether black religion is this worldly or otherworldly.**



# 1.

## Why Black Religion Is Different

**B**LACK RELIGION DIFFERS from white religion because blacks differ from whites. I am not referring here to the color of skin but to the difference in cultural origin. The United States is a Western nation because the majority of its citizens are descendants of European immigrants who brought their culture with them to this hemisphere. Blacks, and all minorities, therefore, enjoy a different cultural matrix from whites. Of course there exists a peculiar American culture of which blacks are not only a part but which they have had a major role in creating. Jazz is very American; it is also very African. Most whites and a fair number of minority Americans have been so completely integrated into American culture that the national origins of their forebears are no longer very relevant to their day to day experience. However, because of a highly developed sense of racial consciousness in this country, blacks have always been made aware of their difference from whites, and have never been fully integrated into American society. But at the same time, because most blacks were slaves they were not free to defend their own cultural heritage. Blacks, therefore, were repulsed historically from white culture, while at the same time they were prohibited, under the institution of slavery, the organized means (schools, cultural associations etc.) of preserving African culture. And so there has been a lively debate over just how influential African culture has been on American black religion. It is necessary, therefore, to examine first the African religious heritage which all blacks share, and then to try to determine the effect that the institution of slavery in North America exerted on that heritage, with the goal of understanding better why black religion is different from white religion.

In the antebellum South it was generally recognized that certain African religious influences persisted among the slaves. Even the sympathetic Fredrick Law Olmstead observed that religious instruction was so poor and restricted among blacks that "the result in the majority of cases has been merely to furnish a delusive clothing of Christian forms and phrases, to the original vague superstition of the African savage."<sup>1</sup> Evangelists such as the Reverend Charles Colcock Jones recognized the remnants of Islamic belief, and all sorts of superstitions among the slaves, which he equated with Satanism.<sup>2</sup> The planters also realized that many African religious traditions survived among their slaves. To these slave masters, African culture, like the slaves' black skin, was something alien, and they perceived it as a threat to themselves and their domination of society. Conjurers, for example, could be defiant figures since they operated outside the (Christian) world of the planter and therefore threatened the ruling slave holder's ideology. It was in this hostile white environment that African culture struggled to preserve itself.

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p.109 (first pub. 1860).

<sup>2</sup>Raboteau, p. 47.

In more recent times the question of the extent of African religious influence has assumed an ideological dimension. More radical writers have tended to view black religion as more autonomous: Christian in belief but African in spirit. In general there has been a renewed interest in the African heritage of black Americans.

One way to evaluate how much African culture was retained in black religion is to examine the controversy between Melville J. Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier. Herskovits contended that a great many attributes of black religion could be traced back to African antecedents, while Frazier held that the slaves were generally stripped of their African culture.

Herskovits, an anthropologist, intended to refute the idea, shared even by sympathetic Northern abolitionists such as Olmstead, that the American Negro had no past save that of primitive savagery in Africa. In his most famous work, *The Myth of the Negro Past*,<sup>3</sup> he tried to prove that West Africa, from which most North American slaves came, had an identifiable and sophisticated culture, which was preserved in the New World. He admitted that the amount of cultural retention varied from very strong in Dutch Guiana, Haiti and Brazil, to relatively weak in the United States. Nonetheless, the myth which Herskovits most wanted to debunk was that the differences between black and white behavior were attributable to "black inferiority." Rather, he contended, they could be traced to the differences between European and African culture.

A good example of Herskovits' methodology can be seen in his explanation of why the majority of American blacks became Baptists. He refuted the idea that blacks, by nature simple, gravitated towards the simple style of Baptist worship. Recognizing that the greater democracy of the Baptist polity gave blacks some cherished freedom and that the greater emotionalism accepted in the services was important because of its congeniality with African practice, Herskovits identified the practice of immersion as the crucial factor, indispensable for explaining black proclivity for affiliation with Baptist churches.

Herskovits pointed out that river spirits and river cults have a prominent role in West African religious beliefs and that they have persisted among blacks in most of the New World. In many parts of Africa elaborate ceremonies surround the visiting of rivers or other bodies of water, to draw off its contents for use in religious rituals. Pilgrimages to sacred water often occur at which the devotees are sometimes possessed by spirits and fling themselves into the water. Herskovits concludes:

But in the United States, where neither *Bosumtwe* nor *watra mama* nor *Dambalia* is worshipped, Negro Baptists do not run into the water under possession by African gods. Their water rituals are those of baptism. Yet it is significant that, as the novitiate whose revelation has brought him to the running stream or the tidal cove is immersed, the spirit descends on him at that moment if at all, and a possession hysteria develops that in its outward appearance, at least is almost indistinguishable from the possession brought on by the African water deities. . . The slaves, then, came to the United States with a tradition which found worship involving immersion in a body of water understandable, and encountered this belief among those whose churches and manner of worship were least strange to them. When, in addition, they found in this group those whites who tended to be closest to the lowly, and thus tended to be the least formidable persons in their new setting, they understandably affiliated with it and initiated a tradition which holds to the present time.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.

<sup>4</sup>Herskovits, pp. 232-35.

The blending of African and Christian elements can be seen in this description, by a slave, of a river baptism: "Duh preachuh and duh candidates goes down in duh watuh. Den duh preachuh make a prayuh tuh duh ribbuh and duh ribbuh washed duh sin away."<sup>6</sup> Certainly there is some truth to Herskovits' assertion that elements of African culture survived the slave system and continued to influence black American culture.

In direct opposition to the view of Herskovits is the opinion of the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier who wrote: ". . . one must recognize from the beginning that because of the manner in which the Negroes were captured in Africa and enslaved, they were practically stripped of their social heritage."<sup>6</sup> Many of the slaves had been captured in intertribal wars and were therefore young males, poor bearers of the cultural heritage of a people. Herded into holding camps and then into ships for the passage across the Atlantic, the slaves found no regard for clan or tribal differences, much less for family ties. Once in the English colonies the Africans were split up into small groups on plantations, forbidden to speak their own language, regimented, and carefully supervised by the slave owner or by his overseer. On the plantations the slaves were treated as beasts of burden, where there was hardly a sense of community on the work gangs. Even in the slave quarters the master or his overseer was vigilant to undermine a strong sense of solidarity among the slaves. Moreover, since slavery was a part of the plantation system of agriculture, the buying and selling of slaves, according to economic needs, was a standard practice. This involuntary mobility of the slave population contributed to a loss of social cohesion and was especially severe on the most basic social unit—the family. There was no legal marriage between slaves. Families were dispersed by masters who sold husbands, wives, or children at will. Even the most scrupulous owner, when faced with economic difficulties, rarely hesitated to break up nuclear families. For all these reasons Frazier concludes: ". . . it is impossible to establish any continuity between African religious practices and the Negro church in the United States."<sup>7</sup>

Frazier too, addressed himself to the question why the slaves were evangelized so successfully by the Baptists and Methodists. Unlike Herskovits, Frazier saw the explanation lying not in the African religious experience but rather in the appeal of the evangelicals to the poor, the ignorant, and the outcast; their fiery message of salvation and escape from the woes of the world; and their emphasis on a sign of conversion. It should be noted, however, that Frazier did not minimize the effect of Christianity on the slaves. Quite the contrary, he saw conversion as bringing blacks into a union with their fellow slaves. Christianity provided a new basis of social cohesion and it even occasionally broke down the barriers between the slaves and their masters, who now participated in the same religious services. Even though Frazier sees an all but complete break between African religion and New World Christianity, he recognizes that both contributed a similar and vital function for blacks: "It is our position that it was not what remained of African culture or African religious experience but the Christian religion that provided the new basis of social cohesion"<sup>8</sup>

The problem of defining and explaining social change is a difficult one. It is an even more difficult task when social change is affected by the interaction of two civilizations, because so many factors need to be weighed. Part of the disagreement between Herskovits and Frazier lies in their placing different stress on various factors. Perhaps most of the controversy can be traced simply to divergent points of view. Some scholars might view the existence of an Ancient Roman Empire and a Medieval Holy Roman Empire as conclusive proof of an historical break between the Ancient and Medieval periods of European history; others might see them as proof of the remarkable continuity of an idea. Some see

<sup>6</sup>Quoted by Raboteau, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup>Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1974), p.9. (first pub. 1964).

<sup>7</sup>Frazier, *Negro Church*, pp. 9-13.

<sup>8</sup>Frazier, *Negro Church*, p. 14.

history as a cycle of almost imperceptible change, others as a series of violent revolutions created by the clash of antithetical structures.

Every living civilization is capable of exporting itself to distant places. It is also capable of borrowing from other civilizations, or refusing to borrow.<sup>9</sup> This type of transfer can occur over such a long period of time that it is sometimes difficult to detect. Paper, for example, was invented in China in 105 A.D. Almost seven hundred years later the secret of its manufacture was learned by the Arabs. Rags replaced vegetable matter and paper slowly spread across the Moslem world, including Spain, by the eleventh or twelfth centuries. It was not until about 1350 that paper replaced parchment in the West.<sup>10</sup> Such peregrinations are not unusual.

History is very much on the side of the possible retention of African culture among the slaves, as Herskovits contends. Yet it must also be considered that the interplay of European and African civilization was not a "normal" one in the New World, and it is to that relationship, in a hemispheric perspective, that we must now briefly turn.

Of course the most "abnormal" aspect of the relationship between European and African culture is that it was not an association of trading partners or even of conqueror and conquered, but rather of master and slave. Moreover, it was practiced neither in Europe nor in Africa but in North and South America, where the subtype and the relative influence of both civilizations varied significantly in different geographical areas. These variations can be seen in a brief comparison of the slave experiences in South America and in mainland North America.

Common to many African societies is the belief in a Supreme Creator, a High God, who is too exalted to be actively concerned with the daily lives of mankind, and too remote to receive prayers and sacrifices. Lesser divinities receive the most attention and are associated with natural forces or phenomena. These include gods of thunder, lightning, rain; deities associated with fertility, water, trees, winds and animals. The gods may be benevolent or malevolent, each having priests and devotees who served them. There is also a world of spirits, which inhabit objects such as trees. Central to the operation of these spirits is the use of sacred medicines which can harm or cure. Magic is an integral part of West African religion and priests are often diviners and herbalists as well. Just as roots and herbs can cause ill or good, charms and amulets can guard against magic or can even countercharm and negate the force of the protective charm. Ancestors are often revered both as founders of villages and as intercessors with the gods to grant health and fertility to their descendants. Ancestors are believed to be reincarnated in their descendants, and the elderly are especially respected because they preserve the memory of the dead and are chronologically closer to their forefathers. Because of the significance of ancestors, burial rites are very important, and dancing, drumming and singing play a vital role in the worship of gods and ancestors.<sup>11</sup> Intrinsic to African religion is the close relationship between the supernatural and natural. "The power of the gods and spirits was effectively present in the lives of man, for good or ill, on every level—environmental, individual, social, national, and cosmic."<sup>12</sup>

The preservation of African religion can be discerned much more clearly in South America. Perhaps the most important reason for this greater survival was the syncretism of Catholicism. As can be seen from the brief description above, there are several practices in African religion which could adapt more easily to Catholicism than to evangelical Protestantism. For example, the Catholic concept of the role of Jesus, Mary, guardian angels and the saints, as intermediaries and intercessors

<sup>9</sup>Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols., trans. by Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), II, pp. 763-64 (first pub. 1949).

<sup>10</sup>Braudel, p. 773-74.

<sup>11</sup>Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll* (New York: Vintage, 1972), pp. 194-202.

<sup>12</sup>Raboteau, pp. 8-16.

with the Father/Creator corresponded well to the African concept of a supreme and remote God and lesser gods who intervened in the affairs of men. Sometimes Catholic saints were identified with African gods, based on the similarity of their powers. For example, St. Barbara, the protectress against thunder and lightning was identified with Shango, a god of thunder and lightning. Often the identification was made on the basis of the similarity of emblems. Oshossi, therefore, god of the hunt, was known as St. George or as St. Michael the Archangel, since both were depicted as warriors brandishing a sword.<sup>13</sup> The Catholic use of holy objects such as holy water, candles, vestments, and statues was more similar to African practice than the austerity of evangelical Protestantism. The ritual of the Anointing of the Sick, for example, could syncretize more easily with the African veneration of ancestors and elaborate funeral ceremonies. Finally, in Cuba and Brazil, confraternities organized by the Church along regional African lines served as important institutions preserving African custom within Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> Catholicism, which failed to moderate the severity of slavery and white racism in Latin America, did nonetheless help to formulate a different attitude towards African culture than that which developed in Anglo-Saxon North America. As Eugene Genovese has noted, the rate of intermarriage, the access of blacks to positions of power, and the integration of all the people into a single nationality in Brazil can be explained in large part by the impact of Catholicism on society as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

Demographic factors also influenced the retention of African culture in South America. The slave population of the United States was the only one in the New World which experienced a natural increase. Almost ten million African slaves were imported into the Americas from the beginning of the trade to 1861. Only 427,000 of that total went to the English North American colonies and the United States. By 1861 the slave population of the United States exceeded four million, or a ten fold increase of the number originally imported. By contrast, 748,000 Africans had been imported to Jamaica. By 1834 their number was down to 311,000. Put another way, at the U.S. rate of increase, Afro-Cubans would have numbered 24,570,000 by 1950 instead of the actual 1,224,000.<sup>16</sup> The reasons for the divergent U.S. demographic pattern is unclear, though it is probable that it can be explained partially by the better material conditions and healthier climate of the Southern United States.<sup>17</sup> Since the number of Africans imported was relatively small, the ratio of black to white was relatively low in the United States, in a hemispheric perspective. Moreover, the number of slaves on each farm was relatively small in the Old South. Half of the slaves lived on farms with less than twenty slaves. In other words, if we define a large plantation as a unit of fifty slaves, then only one quarter of the Southern slaves lived on a big plantation.<sup>18</sup>

There were several factors, therefore, which inhibited the retention of African religion by the slaves in the Southern United States. Protestantism, particularly the brand of puritanical, evangelical Protestantism which became prevalent in the American South, provided a hostile environment for the pantheism and rich ritualism of West African religion. The number of African slaves imported into the South was small relative to the number of whites. Moreover, the slave population increased naturally and not through the influx of large numbers of Africans who could revive and sustain African practice. Blacks, therefore, were a minority in white society and they were broken into small

<sup>13</sup>Raboteau, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup>Raboteau, pp. 87-88.

<sup>15</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 179.

<sup>16</sup>These figures are cited by Raboteau, pp. 89-91.

<sup>17</sup>Genovese makes the important distinction between material conditions and cultural autonomy, see *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 56-57. In another essay the author also make the point that the origin of better material conditions was economic. The closing of the slave trade in 1808 coincided precisely with the opening of the frontier and the rise of the Cotton Kingdom. The need for more slaves made it necessary to provide for conditions which encouraged reproduction. Genovese also notes that within a generation or two the original economic motivation was transformed into "the accepted standard of decency for the ruling class." See Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), pp. 97-99.

<sup>18</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 7.

groups on farms and small plantations where the strict supervision and intimacy of white contact made it difficult to preserve their African heritage. The African religious tradition, therefore, was lost much more quickly and fully in the United States than in other parts of the Western Hemisphere.

The limited ability of American religion to absorb African religious belief had two consequences. One was the large residue of superstition, voodoo, hoodoo, conjure, magic, divination, and herbalism, which constituted black folk religion. These remnants of African religion continued to thrive both outside and alongside Christianity. The second consequence was the development of an Afro-Christianity which was both unique, and at the same time a part of Euro-Christianity as practiced in North America.<sup>19</sup> Some of the differences between white and black religion in the South will be examined in a later chapter, but first it is necessary to see how one aspect of African religion was syncretized with a crucial element of white evangelical religion.

African spirit possession differs significantly in theological meaning from the shouting experience found in the revivalist tradition of American evangelicalism. In the former, the devotee is actually possessed by the god who displaces the human personality. In evangelical Protestantism the believer is filled with the Holy Spirit and the experience induces a rapture manifested by shouting, singing, or dancing. Nevertheless, in traditional black Christianity there is present a residue of African tradition, which merges with and transforms the white practice.

This residue was most obvious in the camp meetings held in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Both blacks and whites, moved by the Spirit, shouted, barked, laughed, and danced, but it was obvious to many that each race had its own particular revival style.<sup>20</sup> The ring shout was the most frequently described black religious dance. As late as 1878 Bishop Daniel Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church confronted the powerful pull of this religious ceremony:

About this time I attended a "bush meeting". . . after the sermon they formed a ring, and with coats off sung, clapped their hands and stamped their feet in a most ridiculous and heathenish way. I requested the pastor to go and stop their dancing. At his request they stopped their dancing and clapping of hands, but remained singing and rocking their bodies to and fro. This they did for about fifteen minutes. Then I went, and taking their leader by the arm requested him to desist and to sit down and sing in a rational manner. I told him also that it was heathenish and disgraceful to themselves, the race, and the Christian name. In that instance they broke up their ring; but would not sit down, and walked sullenly away. After the sermon, having another opportunity of speaking alone to this young leader of the singing and clapping ring, he said: "Sinners won't get converted unless there is a ring." Said I: "You might sing till you fell down dead, and you would fail to convert a single sinner because nothing but the Spirit of God and the word of God can convert sinners." He replied: the Spirit of God works upon people in different ways. At camp meeting, there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted." This was his idea, and it is also that of many others. These "Bands" I have had to encounter in many places. . . To the most thoughtful. . . I usually succeeded in making the "Band" disgusting; but by the ignorant masses. . . it was regarded as the essence of religion.<sup>21</sup>

The shout is a good example of an African religious custom, the dance, which was retained in black Christianity. As Frazier maintains, the shout represents a break with African heritage, since the

<sup>19</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 211.

<sup>20</sup>Raboteau, pp. 59-61.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted by Raboteau, pp. 68-69.

theological significance has been altered. But as Herskovits maintains, the shout also represents a retention of an African tradition. Both positions are true to a certain degree. Most significant is that the ring shout, however transformed, was one African retention which rendered the black religious experience distinctive within American Christianity. The ring shout was a "holy dance" which was a "two-way bridge connecting the core of West African religions—possession by the gods—to the core of evangelical Protestantism—experience of conversion."<sup>22</sup> To the thoroughly Americanized (i.e. Europeanized) Bishop Payne, the ring shout was "disgusting"; to those who danced it, it was the "essence of religion", that is, the essence of black religion.

The heritage of African religion, no matter how imperfectly preserved, was one important element of black religion which distinguished it from white Christianity. Other factors, introduced in the New World, continued to nurture divergent forms of black and white Christianity. No factor influenced religion more than the institution of slavery. Of course slavery affected all forms of experience, and was largely responsible for the creation of two distinct Southern cultures, divided along racial lines. If we are to understand how black religion developed and functioned historically, we must first try to understand something of the peculiar structure of slavery in the Old South.

Slavery can be viewed as a system of class rule. In it one man not only owns the fruit of another man's labor, but also the person of the man himself. Slave societies in the Americas grew out of the expansion of Europe which began in the fifteenth century. One of the consequences of that expansion was the development of the first worldwide market and an increasing demand for raw products which could not be produced in Europe. The colonial powers lacked sufficient manpower to exploit these newly discovered resources, while native populations were often decimated by imported European diseases and by efforts at forced labor. The solution to this economic problem was the forced bondage and transportation of black Africans to the Americas, especially as a work force in colonial agriculture.

There is nothing inherently racist in slavery. In the past, several and various cultures have had a system of slavery which never involved more than one race. In the New World, however, slavery was always also a system of the subordination of one race by another. With racial subordination came racism and a racist ideology. Racism created a series of complex relationships not only between master and slave, but also between non-slaveholding whites and slaves, and between those whites and free blacks. In fact racism also affected the relationship between the planters and poorer whites. In short, slavery and racism permeated and distinguished the society of the American South.

Theoretically, slavery rested on the idea that a slave was not human, but chattel, a possession, over which the master exercised complete control. This was the fundamental dilemma facing the slaveholders of the South: how to reconcile the contradiction that slaves could not become what they were supposed to be. Human beings could not become non-humans.

Much of the difficulty in reconciling this contradiction lay in the self image of the planter class. The United States was a democracy. Even before the Revolution, the colonies were ablaze with the ideas of equality and of fundamental natural rights. The South, perhaps more so than the North, formulated these American ideals which were contradicted daily by the existence of a slave class.

In addition to a strong American democratic impulse, the Southern planters also cultivated a self image derived from the world of the European seigniorial class. The revival in interest in aristocracy,

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<sup>22</sup>Raboteau, p. 73.

medieval history, and feudal privilege, which was embodied in works like *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) by Montesquieu, swept over Europe and the English colonies in the eighteenth century. It prompted an image of aristocracy as the best form of government, and aristocrats as the natural and best leaders of society. Formulated in opposition to the absolutism of Louis XIV in France, this aristocratic revival went back to medieval history, specifically to feudal law, for the justification of its view of society.

In the Middle Ages nearly every person was bound, in some way, to another person. On the lowest level the serf was bound to the lord of the manor. The serf was not a slave, he was free, though not completely so. The serf owed certain duties and obligations to his lord and was subject to his jurisdiction. But as a tenant he enjoyed certain rights of possession to his holding which he could pass on to his sons, and he benefitted from the protection of his lord. Once certain rents and services had been paid he was free to enjoy the fruits of his own labor.<sup>23</sup> Medieval society was permeated with the idea of contract, of mutual obligation. It was no disgrace to be bound to another man. Quite the contrary, it was a source of pride to be the vassal of a great and powerful lord, and all levels of society, even kings, were subject, at least theoretically, to overlords.

John Locke, at the end of the seventeenth century, wrote his *Two Treatises on Civil Government* which popularized the idea of natural rights and social contract derived from feudal law. Locke had a profound effect on Jefferson (and on other Americans) who used it as the basis of his argument in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>24</sup> The idea that mutual obligations served as the basis of government and society pervaded American thought, especially the minds of the Southern planter class of which Jefferson himself was part.

The quandary which faced the Southern Planters—the denial of the humanity of their slaves—was provoked, then, by their own democratic impulses, and by their self image as heirs of the European seignurial tradition. The problem was further aggravated by the intimacy peculiar to slavery in the United States. The lack of absentee masters and the small size of the farms and plantations did not isolate the races and allow the planters to turn their slaves into mere abstractions.<sup>25</sup>

The mechanism which reconciled the contradiction between the denial of the slave's humanity and the democratic yet aristocratic self image of the planters, by providing a dominant ideology, was paternalism. Mirroring the function of the medieval seigneur, the slave masters defined slavery as a reciprocal arrangement in which they bestowed protection and direction on the slaves in return for their involuntary labor. Central, therefore, to the pro-slavery argument was the concept of duty and burden for the master, and reciprocal rights for the slave:

Slavery is the duty and obligation of the slave to labor for the mutual benefit of both master and slave, under a warrant to the slave of protection, and a comfortable subsistence, under all circumstances. . . The master, as the head of the system, has a right to the obedience and labor of the slave, but the slave has also his mutual rights in the master; the right of protection, the right of counsel and guidance, the right of subsistence, the right of care and attention in sickness and old age. He has also a right in his master as the sole arbiter in all his wrongs and difficulties, as a merciful judge and dispenser of law to award the penalty of his misdeeds.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. by L.A. Manyon, 2 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 263.

<sup>24</sup>Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: Random House, 1958).

<sup>25</sup>I acknowledge the oversimplification of this analysis of the planter mentality. See Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, especially Part One, Chapter Two; Clement Eaton, *The Mind of the Old South*, rev. ed. (n.p.: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), especially Chapters Two and Three; and William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979) first pub. 1957, especially Chapters Two and Three.

<sup>26</sup>E.N. Elliott, [President of Planters College in Mississippi], Introduction to *Cotton Is King and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, p.vii, quoted by



This passage, dating from the antebellum period, indicates a reciprocal relationship between master and slave but certainly not an equal one. Each recognized it as such and therefore approached the relationship from a different point of view. For example, it was important to the slaveholders to cultivate a self image of magnanimity and kindness. Although they were not unappreciative, the slaves tended to view acts of kindness as their due, as rights. Nothing frustrated the slaveowners more than the lack of slave "gratitude" because it denied their own self image as moral human beings. The slaves had accepted paternalism, but on their own terms and demanded their "rights."<sup>27</sup>

Two examples of how paternalism functioned will suffice. Paternalism not only governed the master-slave relationship, it also affected all the societal relationships of the Old South. The local planter was usually related to many of the local whites, both rich and poor. The plantation often functioned as the center of local politics and society, where both blacks and whites were invited to plantation barbeques. Nearly everyone was drawn, in some way, into plantation life. The lower and middle class white farmers formed slave patrols, worked as day laborers on the plantation, where they sold their corn and pigs, and brought their cotton to be ginned. Overseers were either sons or close kin of the planters, who were learning to be planters themselves, or they were drawn from the lower class whites ("white trash"). The overseer was often the victim of paternalism. He was used by the planters to buffet themselves from the harsh realities of slavery. The slaves recognized this and were able, sometimes, to manipulate overseer and master against each other. An appeal to the kindness of "Ole Massa" played on the self image of the planter, but it also drew the slave deeper into paternalistic dependence.

The law, which embodied the ideals of the dominant planter class, was often scrupulously interpreted in the South. Technically at least, a master could not murder a slave, he could cause his death, but how can you murder your own property? Rape meant rape of a white woman, for no such crime against black women existed in law. The reality of these legal definitions horrified many antebellum planters who were, by and large, humane and responsible men and women. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, therefore, many of these slave laws were altered. The courts conceded the rights of slaves to defend themselves against white aggression even to the point of killing their attacker, and theoretically slaveholders faced punishment for the purposeful killing of a slave.<sup>28</sup> Practically, slaveholders were restrained more by the consensus of public opinion rather than the law, which recognized that certain behavior was necessary to preserve the institution of slavery.

The result of these reforms was a confusion between the law and its individual application. The slaveholders erected a system of law which denied that slaves were human, then they circumvented the law by acknowledging the slaves' humanity in individual cases. The existence of positive state law was contradicted by the rights of slaveholders over their property. The slave laws existed in a dual system with plantation law.

Again, as in the triangle between slave, overseer, and master, the existence of this dual system of positive law and plantation law drew the slaves deeper into paternalism, since they were protected less by the positive law than by the kindness of the master. But again the significance of paternalism differed between master and slave. The masters saw themselves as human protectors, in effect as medieval lords. The slaves, on the other hand, recognized the contradiction and hypocrisy between white law and white behavior, which simultaneously denied and recognized their humanity. They accepted paternalism on their own terms as a mechanism which protected their own rights, as a means of affirming their humanity.<sup>29</sup>

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Genovese, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 145-146.

<sup>28</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>29</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 48-49.

The conversion of African slaves to Christianity can only be understood in the context of the institution of slavery and the paternalistic ethos. As with other elements of paternalism, described above, religion fulfilled different needs for master and slave. For the master it constituted a means of insuring slave docility while fulfilling a generally sincere sense of Christian responsibility. In other words it was an aid in preserving the institution of slavery and in establishing an increasingly Christian self image. For the slaves, Christianity reinforced self worth and solidarity with fellow blacks. In other words it was a means of preserving themselves, resisting the dehumanization of human bondage. Christianity therefore, became the principal psychological battleground between master and slave, white and black.

Christianity became a means of preserving slavery because it was becoming an increasingly important part of the life style accepted by the Southern planter class. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries there was widespread opposition to the conversion of slaves. One of the principal reasons was the fear that baptism would emancipate them. Even though attitudes did not change fully for several more decades, by 1706 at least six colonial legislatures passed laws denying that baptism altered the status of the slaves.<sup>30</sup> Until the antebellum period, though, there was at best a general ambivalence among the planters regarding the conversion of African slaves. Some saw it as a means of social control, while others were concerned that Christianity made master and slave spiritual equals.

In the antebellum period the great surge in evangelizing the slaves was part of a larger reform movement. From the Revolution to secession, the South set out on a program of self reform. But it was a conservative reform. In fact, the period from 1831 to 1861 was marked by both reform and reaction.

The impetus for the reform is sometimes attributed to Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. While it is true that Turner's revolt did seriously jar the planters and marshalled the slaveholders into action, the reform movement was more deeply seated and fundamental than a mere reaction to a solitary event. The planters, or at least a forward looking segment of them, were determined to oppose both the reactionaries of their class who wanted to avoid all change, and also the emancipationists who envisioned a gradual abolition of slavery. These reformers were conservative in seeking to preserve slavery but willing to initiate change in order to attain their goal. Therefore, there was a paradox of behavior in the antebellum period: a phase of reaction and entrenchment which was simultaneously a time of material improvement for the slaves. The increasingly vocal accusations of the Northern abolitionists forced the Southern planters to formulate a defense of slavery, but the reform movement both preceeded abolitionism and was a genuine effort of self reformation. The strategy, not unlike that recently adopted in South Africa, was to improve the material conditions of life while narrowing access to freedom and the promise of eventual emancipation. As Eugene Genovese has concluded: "Their position made perfect sense: Make the South safe for slaveholders by confirming the blacks in perpetual slavery and by making it possible for them to accept their fate."<sup>31</sup>

The religious history of the antebellum South is intelligible only in the context of this conservative reform movement. Previously, but especially after the discovery of the plot hatched by Denmark Vesey, who was a member of the troublesome Hampstead Methodist Church in Charleston, and the violence initiated by Nat Turner, a Baptist Preacher, the slaveholders decided to utilize religion as a part of their attempt to preserve slavery. While the example of Turner reminded them of the dangers of religion, they viewed Christianity as a means of social control. The slaveholders recognized the importance of spirituality to their African slaves and were determined to control the type of religion they experienced.

<sup>30</sup>Raboteau, p. 99.

<sup>31</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 51.

As we shall see, the Christianization of the African slaves proceeded slowly in the eighteenth century because of the ambivalence or hostility of the planters. Once they recognized religion as a useful social tool, however, they recommended its spread. Hence, the words of Thomas Affleck, a noted agricultural reformer in his *Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book*:

You will find that an hour devoted every Sabbath morning to their moral and religious instruction would prove a great aid to you in bringing about a better state of things amongst the Negroes. It has been thoroughly tried, and with most satisfactory results, in many parts of the South. As a matter of mere interest it has proved to be advisable, to say nothing of it as a point of duty. The effect upon their general good behavior, their cleanliness and good conduct on the Sabbath is such as alone to recommend it to the Planter and Overseer.<sup>32</sup>

The effort to convert the slaves was further aided by the decline in anti-slavery sentiment among the evangelicals, who by this time constituted a majority of Christians in the South. Thus evangelicalism became more acceptable to the ruling class. Finally another factor must be recognized, the increasing religious sincerity of the planters themselves, who began to see the conversion of their black family as their religious duty.

The apparent contradictions of the antebellum period become intelligible in the context of the conservative reform of the planters: "a decline of anti-slavery sentiment in the southern churches; laws against black preachers; laws against teaching slaves to read and write; encouragement of oral instructions of slaves in the Christian faith; the campaigns to encourage more humane treatment of slaves. The religious history of the period formed part of the great thrust to reform slavery as a way of life and to make it bearable for the slaves."<sup>33</sup>

By the time of the Civil War the mass of the slaves had been converted to Christianity, but they had hardly been integrated into the Southern church. Drawn into the paternalism which defined their relationship, master and slave accepted Christianization on their own terms. The plan to use Christianity to perpetuate slavery was the work of the white man. It did not appeal to blacks and it certainly did not fulfill their needs. The slaves responded with a religion of their own, a black Christianity to which we must now turn.

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<sup>32</sup>Quoted by Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 190.

<sup>33</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 186.

## 2.

# The Early Development of Black Religion and Formative Influences: The Invisible Institution

**T**HE SLAVES WERE DISTINGUISHED, culturally, from whites by their African heritage. But once blacks were brought to the New World they became subject to forces at work in American society. The most important of these forces was slavery, the institution which defined the social status and function of blacks in the United States. But there were others. Through various forms of coercion blacks were compelled to speak the white man's language, obey his laws, and to adopt at least the outward form of the master's religion. In a white society hostile to diversity, the preservation of blackness required not only courage but also the association of like minded people. This was the origin and function of the invisible institution.

The invisible institution can be defined simply as black religion under slavery. But as the term implies it refers to the existence of a separate institution embodying an expression of Christianity which was peculiarly black. It was "invisible" because most black organizations, including churches, were prohibited under the slave laws. Many slaves regularly attended Sunday services at white churches, sometimes alone, sometimes with their masters, but they were never unsupervised by whites for very long.

In an effort to assert their own autonomy there existed an extensive religious life of the slaves hidden from the eyes of their masters. Although the invisible institution was never completely divorced from regular Sunday worship, the slaves frequently met for separate and often illicit prayer meetings. At great personal risk they gathered in cabins, or in secluded woods and thickets, so called "hush harbors," to pray and sing together. The fact that the slaves had worked the entire day, from dawn to dusk, and would do the same the following day, did not dampen their spirits or quench their desire for a "real meetin' with some real preachin'," that is, a meeting free not only of white supervision but of white cultural norms as well. These meetings were led sometimes by the whole group, sometimes by a slave preacher, who in his official capacity was generally closely scrutinized by the master or overseer. By the 1830's there was legislation forbidding the instruction of slaves to read and write so that most slave preachers were illiterate. As a result most were eloquent preachers who memorized their Bible passages. An oral tradition, oral instruction, and an emphasis on an experiential spirituality distinguished the invisible institution from white evangelicalism. The slave spirituals, for example, were unique and dramatic manifestations of black Bible-centered religion. Drawing on both African and Anglo-American musical traditions, these spirituals were sung, heard, shouted, and danced with excitement and glee and they provide a valuable glimpse into the black religious soul.

Most historians agree that very few African slaves were converted to Christianity before the middle

of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> There were several reasons for this. Certainly one of them was the outright opposition of the slaveowners. Another was the fact that most of the slaves at that time were African born and spoke either little or no English, in large part because there was very little incentive to become Europeanized.

Another important reason for the paucity of slave conversions was that even where the interest in Christianity existed, it was well beyond the capacity of the Church to evangelize the slaves. The Church of England, which was legally established in most of the Southern colonies, founded the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in London in 1701, specifically to do missionary work among the Indians and the slaves. This body worked through the branches of the official church and was therefore prey to all its weakness. The Church of England in the American colonies was understaffed, had to administer parishes of enormous size where transportation was very difficult, and was dominated by the planter class. The truth was it could not adequately minister to the European population in the South.<sup>2</sup>

Slave conversions were also slowed by the instructional approach of the Church of England. This conservative Protestant style of evangelization emphasized careful nurture through instruction. Such an approach was not destined to win either many souls or to do it very quickly.

Early agents of the S.P.G. such as Alexander Garden and Joseph Ottolenghe, who worked in South Carolina and Georgia respectively, developed a technique of religious instruction which was equivalent to a basic education. They both proceeded by teaching the slaves the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments and some catechism. Using both spelling books and Bibles, their intention was to teach each slave to be a Christian by learning to read the Bible.

Garden himself suggested that this instruction be placed in the hands of "Negro Schoolmasters, Home-born, and equally Property as other Slaves, but educated for this Service, and employed in it during their Lives, as the others are in any other Service whatsoever."<sup>3</sup> Following Garden's advice, the Society purchased, in 1742, two black teenagers named Harry and Andrew. Andrew apparently proved himself to be unfit, but Harry taught at the school for more than twenty years. By 1746 Garden informed the S.P.G. that the school had already trained twenty-eight children, was training fifty-five more during the day, and an additional fifteen adults at night.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of conversion through instruction may have transformed the educational status of American blacks. However, it was well beyond the capacity of the S.P.G. to instruct a significant number of the slaves. More importantly, such a transformation would never have been permitted by the slaveholders who were constantly adding new regulations to prohibit the education of African slaves.

"The Dawn of the new Day", to use Carter Woodson's happy phrase, came with the Great Awakening. This religious movement infused a great emotionalism into American religion and transformed it, especially in the South. Beginning in the 1740's evangelicals, Presbyterians, and especially Methodists and Baptists, were converting large numbers of people (whites) in the Southern colonies, where organized religion of any kind was the weakest. In short, Southern blacks were converted to evangelical Protestantism for the same reasons that Southern whites were. The most important of which was that it was the evangelicals who penetrated the frontier.<sup>5</sup> Thus it was white

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<sup>1</sup>Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 188-89 and Raboteau, pp. 96-110.

<sup>2</sup>Tristano, *Southern Catholics*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Raboteau, p. 116.

<sup>4</sup>Raboteau, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup>Tristano, *Southern Catholics*, pp. 30-34.

evangelicals who evangelized the slaves. This is one example of how whites dominated blacks, yet as we shall see this domination was not total since blacks utilized evangelical Protestantism to forge a religious expression which was uniquely their own.

Several other factors can be cited which help to explain why evangelicals, particularly Methodists and Baptists, succeeded in converting a large segment of the slave population. No direct connection between West African religion and American evangelical Protestantism can be proven, but neither can cultural affinities be completely ignored. For example, the emotionalism of the Great Awakening appealed to blacks who shared an experience where singing, dancing, shouting, and spirit possession was part of their religious heritage. The religious values of Southern (white) society were themselves being transformed. Whites, including slaveholders, were now more fervent in their Christianity. Most masters no longer opposed conversion, in fact slaveowners actively sought to introduce their slaves to Christianity. These external factors can only explain incompletely why the vast majority of blacks in this country became Baptists and Methodists. A fuller explanation must be sought within the organization and attitude of these two denominations themselves.

Whereas the Church of England was limited mostly to the urban centers and Eastern seaboard of the South, and Catholicism was present only in isolated pockets of Maryland and Louisiana, the Baptists and Methodists worked hard at reaching all the people on the Southern frontier. The organization of each, the local autonomy of the Baptists, and the mobility of the circuit riders in Methodism, enabled both groups to contact the whole of Southern society. W.E.B. Du Bois has suggested an explanation for the success of the Baptists in evangelizing the slaves: that in the beginning, the Church was confined to the plantation and consisted primarily of a series of disconnected units. This geographical limitation was one to which the decentralized democratic Baptist polity could easily adapt.<sup>6</sup>

Both Baptists and Methodists had a sufficiently flexible organization which permitted them to appoint black preachers or "assistants" which integrated the slaves into the denomination at a very early stage. This opportunity to exercise even a limited control over their congregation had enormous appeal for blacks and was a powerful incentive for conversion. Furthermore, both denominations earned good will through genuine interest in the improvement of the slaves' living conditions and by permitting racially mixed congregations, at least at first. Perhaps the most important factor in the success of the Baptists and the Methodists was that they spoke plainly and offered a message of hope to blacks. John Thompson explained why he and other slaves were drawn to Methodism:

My mistress and her family were all Episcopalians. The nearest church was five miles from our plantation, and there was no Methodist church nearer than ten miles. So we went to the Episcopal church, but always came home as we went, for the preaching was above our comprehension, so that we could understand but little that was said. But soon the Methodist religion was brought among us, and preached in a manner so plain that the way faring man, though a fool, could not err therein. This new doctrine produced great consternation among the slaveholders. It was something which they could not understand. It brought glad tidings to the poor bondman; it bound up the broken-hearted; it opened the prison doors to them that were bound, and let the captive go free. As soon as it got among the slaves, it spread from plantation to plantation, until it reached ours, where there were but a few who did not experience religion.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>DuBois, "Of the Faith of Our Fathers," p. 33.

<sup>7</sup>John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, A Fugitive Slave* (Worcester, MA, 1856), quoted by Raboteau, p. 133.

The Anglican predilection for education and nurture, for didactic and moralistic preaching, and for the explanation of doctrine was replaced by an evangelical emphasis on experience and feeling; on an emotional preaching which helped the individual to feel a sense of sin, to fear the pains of hell, and to accept Jesus Christ as personal savior; all with a tendency to minimize complex explanations of doctrine. The conversion experience which depended on the sincerity of the individual and not his education, wealth, or status tended to level all men before God as sinners. This was as appealing to black slaves as it was to white farmers.<sup>8</sup>

The first evangelicals came out of the lower classes. Unencumbered by an economic or ideological need to defend slavery, they were free to develop a point of view based on Christian principles. Most early evangelicals were, therefore, opposed to slavery. Many of those first and second generation Baptists believed in the immediate freeing of the slaves and called themselves Emancipating Baptists. One of these was David Barrow who was born in Virginia and began his ministry there in 1771. He quickly joined the antislavery movement, freed his own slaves, and published a pamphlet entitled *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, examined on the principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture*. For his efforts Barrow suffered ostracism from his coworkers, the (temporary) expulsion from the ministry, and physical attack.<sup>9</sup>

During the first epoch of black religious history Christianity was brought very tentatively to the slaves, mostly through the limited instructional efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. During the second epoch only very limited further progress was made. Southern white religion was itself being transformed so that by the 1820's the evangelicals formed the majority of those churched in the South. However, majority status brought new problems. As more and more people in Southern society identified themselves as Baptists or Methodists, and as many of these evangelicals became increasingly prosperous farmers, planters, and slave owners, the initial enthusiasm of people like David Barrow to reform society according to Christian principles came headlong into confrontation with the ruling class in Southern society. That ruling class was dominated by slave owning planters. From one point of view the evangelicals were coopted by the ruling class. As they became the majority, the establishment, they abandoned their own ethos and adopted that of the planter class. This is but one process of social change.

By the 1820's most slaves had been exposed to Christianity through evangelical revival meetings, but it had hardly become a part of their daily lives. By their very nature revivals could awaken the soul, promote conversion, and whip up religious fervor, but they were sporadic. Once the revival was over, the converts would backslide. What was needed was a systematic, institutional effort to nurture the convert. The solution was the plantation mission. It was probably the institution most responsible for reconciling the idealism of the evangelicals with the determination of the planter class to defend slavery.

Until around 1830 only slaves who lived near major towns and cities could attend church. The majority of rural slaves could only be touched through occasional revivals, and were therefore beyond the reach of the institutional church. Some type of church presence needed to be established on the plantation itself, where the slaves lived. To this end associations were founded, sermons and essays printed, addresses to planter associations made, and pamphlets published.

The program of the plantation mission consisted of the establishment of a church or chapel on the plantation, or nearby, where regular preaching to the slaves on the Sabbath, geared to their level of understanding, could take place. Catechisms were written to instruct the slaves and lectures were held

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<sup>8</sup>For a good description of the pattern of the conversion experience, see Raboteau, pp. 266-271.

<sup>9</sup>Woodson, pp. 28-30.

for them once or twice a week in the evenings. The master and his family were urged to attend these meetings in order to set a good example and to create a climate of Christian community. Sabbath schools for both children and adults were organized, where the instruction was oral, in accordance with slave laws.<sup>10</sup>

Of course none of this could take place without the consent of the slave master. Moreover, the plantation mission was directed not only to the slaves but to the masters as well, since whites also had to be persuaded to accept strict evangelical morality. The plantation missionaries had accepted a gargantuan task. It was not feasible to challenge Southern society, but it was possible to reform it by working from within, by converting individuals. The motivations of the plantation-mission cause were therefore an amalgam of the desires of both the missionaries and the planters: the desire to evangelize and instruct even the most humble in society; the desire to create a biracial community held together by mutual trust, self discipline, and Christian piety; the desire to make slaves docile; the desire to create a model plantation; the desire to defend slavery against the Northern abolitionists; to which we could add, the need to assuage occasional eruptions of Christian conscience.<sup>11</sup>

The leading theoretician and publicist of the plantation mission movement and the personification of the Christian slaveholder was Charles Colcock Jones (1804-63). A Presbyterian minister, he was the pastor of the Midway Church in Liberty County, Georgia. His church was a model for all the South, noted for its attention to the instruction of the slaves and to conducting formal services for them. He founded the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negro in Liberty County. Jones was famous as a catechist to blacks, publishing *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, among other works, in which he urged the development of organizations like his own dedicated to the religious instruction of blacks.

The Reverend Jones was not only at the forefront of the movement to institutionalize the religious instruction of blacks, but as the owner of three plantations and 129 slaves, he was also representative of the antebellum generation of the slaveholding class. As such, he was interested in both nurturing blacks in Christianity and in justifying their continued status as slaves.<sup>12</sup> Jones voiced his resentment of abolitionists who were campaigning for the emancipation of the slaves. He developed an argument essential to the Christian pro-slavery ideology, namely the separation of the religious from the civil condition of the slaves. He defended slavery as a civil institution essential to the well being and social stability of the South, while at the same time he complained that the fuss Northern abolitionists were making over the slaves' civil rights were actually inhibiting their religious instruction and salvation.

. . . the excitement in the free States on the *civil* [my emphasis] condition of the Negroes manifested itself in petitions to Congress, in the circulation of inflammatory publications, and other measures equally and as justly obnoxious to the South; all of which had a disastrous influence on the success of the work we were attempting to do. The effect of the excitement was to turn off the attention of the South from the

<sup>10</sup>Raboteau, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup>Raboteau, p. 174.

<sup>12</sup>Early in his career Jones at least hinted that slavery could be abandoned, "gradually and peacefully," through the religious instruction of the slaves: "The Religious Instruction of our Servants is a duty. Any man with a conscience may be made to feel it. It can be discharged. It must be discharged, whatever becomes of us or them in a civil point of view. It must be discharged as speedily as possible. Our salvation from sore evils, from divine judgment depends upon it. The Religious Instruction of the Negroes is the Foundation of all permanent improvement in intelligence and morals in the slave-holding states. (The only entering wedge to the great and appalling subject of slavery.) The only sun, that appearing through the dark clouds, will show down pure holy light and if the institution of slavery is to be abandoned, will cause the nation to relax its hold, and gradually and peacefully lay it off, and then sit down in delightful repose." Quoted from Milton Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), p. 45. Over a period of time Jones' ideas gradually shifted from his position that slavery must be destroyed, to one that it might be destroyed, and finally to acceptance of slavery as a perpetual apprenticeship in civilization for blacks. See Donald Mathews, "Charles Colcock Jones and the Southern Evangelical Crusade to Form a Biracial Community," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (August, 1975): 306.



*religious* to the *civil* condition of the people in question; and from the salvation of the soul, to the defense and preservation of political rights. . . .A tenderness was begotten in the public mind on the whole subject and every movement touching the improvement of the Negroes was watched. . . .The result was, to arrest in many places efforts happily begun and successfully prosecuted for the religious instruction of the Negroes. It was considered best to disband schools and discontinue meetings, at least for a season; the formation of societies and the action of ecclesiastical bodies, in some degree ceased.<sup>13</sup>

Through this kind of mental construction, the ruling class could forge an ideology which was both Christian and proslavery, which conformed perfectly with the paternalistic model of slavery, and which helped to inspire the antebellum reform movement. The Liberty County Association, which was founded by C.C. Jones, could therefore pronounce its recourse to the law, as if the public statutes were in perfect harmony with the Association's devotion to its Christian duty to God, conscience, and the Negro, to improve the slaves' condition through religious instruction:

We should protect ourselves by Law, as far as possible, from the Circulation of Incendiary publications, and from the teachings of incendiary Agents; and then should we look at home, and enter upon such discharge of our duty to the Negroes, as will meet the approbation of God and our consciences, and commend ourselves to the consciences of other men. One important step towards a discharge of our duty in the most effectual manner, we believe to be, a general and judicious system of religious instruction. . . .No means will so effectually counteract evil influences, and open up our way to proper improvement of our colored population, as a judicious system of religious instruction<sup>14</sup>

At the same time that they were reminding the slaveholders of their Christian duty to deal fairly and humanely with their slaves, the Christian proslavery ideologues were also pointing out to the masters that religious instruction had a more practical benefit. Slaves were not only told that their masters were saving the slaves' immortal souls through instruction, but that as Christians they must serve their masters better. They must ". . .count their Masters 'worthy of all honour' as those whom God has placed over them in this world; 'with all fear,' they are to be 'subject to them' and obey them in all things, possible and lawful, with good will and endeavor to please them well,. . .and let Servants serve their masters as faithfully behind their backs as before their faces. God is present to see, if their masters are not."<sup>15</sup>

The confrontation and eventual reconciliation between the idealism of the evangelicals and the proslavery ideology of the ruling planter class transformed Southern religion. Both white and black religion were affected. No denomination experienced this confrontation more directly than the Methodists.

Because of their more centralized organization, Methodists were able, as early as 1784, to reach a decision advocating the abolition of slavery, calling it "contrary to the golden laws of God, on which hang all the law and the prophets; and the inalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the Revolution. . . ."<sup>16</sup> All slaveholding members of the Church were required to liberate their slaves within twelve months. This position provoked so much debate and opposition that the resolution was never enforced, and the Church quickly retreated from its radical position. Nevertheless, because the

<sup>13</sup>Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah, GA: 1842), p. 125, quoted by Raboteau, p. 158.

<sup>14</sup>Third Annual Report, Liberty County Association (1836, written by Jones), p. 20, quoted by Raboteau, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup>From Jones, *Catechism*, quoted by Raboteau, p. 162-63.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted by Woodson, p. 25.

resolution had been an official statement of the Church, Methodists suffered a reputation for promoting the abolition of slavery which earned them the distrust of the slaveholders. In 1809 Bishop Francis Asbury complained that the slaveholders were denying his ministers access to the slaves: "We are defrauded of great numbers by the pains that are taken to keep the blacks from us; their masters are afraid of the influence of our principles." Asbury saw clearly a solution to the problem: "Would not an amelioration in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans, than any attempt at their emancipation? The state of society, unhappily does not admit of this; besides, the blacks are deprived of the means of instruction; who will take the pains to lead them in ways of salvation, and watch over them that they may not stray, but the Methodists? Well; now their masters will not let them come to hear us."<sup>17</sup> If open abolition was counterproductive then the Methodists would change tack in order to produce the greatest possible good, the amelioration of the slaves' condition. The alteration of tactics worked, Asbury again: "Our tabernacle is crowded again: the minds of the people are strangely changed; and the indignation excited against us is overpast; the people see and confess that the slaves are made better by religion; and wonder to hear the poor Africans pray and exhort."<sup>18</sup> The bishop may have meant that slaves are made better persons by religion, but the slave master's more readily saw them as being made better slaves.

The slaves recognized the compromises with slavery made by the evangelicals. In fact, many blacks viewed the actions and attitude of their masters and the white preachers as betrayals of the same Christian principles they were being asked to accept. William Humbert, a fugitive slave from South Carolina recalled bitterly white hypocrisy.

I have seen a minister hand the sacrament to the deacons to give the slaves, and before the slaves had time to get home, living a great distance from church, have seen one of the same deacons, acting as patrol, flog one of the brother members within two hours of administering the sacrament to him, because he met the slave. . . without a passport, beyond the time allowed him to go home. My opinion of slavery is not a bit different now from what it was then: I always hated it from childhood. I looked on the conduct of the deacon with a feeling of revenge. I thought that a man who would administer the sacrament to a brother church member and flog him before he got home, ought not to live.<sup>19</sup>

Another common observation made by the slaves was that Christians, those who attempted to apply Christian principles to their daily lives, were the hardest masters:

Well, it is something like this—the Christians will oppress you more. For instance, the biggest dinner must be got on Sunday. Now, everybody that has got common sense knows that Sunday is a day of rest. And if you do the least thing in the world that they don't like, they will mark it down against you, and Monday you have got to take a whipping. Now, the card-player and horse-racer won't be there to trouble you. They will eat their breakfast in the morning and feed their dogs, and then be off, and you won't see them again till night. I would rather be with a card-player or sportsman, by half, than a Christian.<sup>20</sup>

Formerly, white (evangelical) ministers had earned considerable good feeling from blacks because of their opposition or coolness towards slavery. By the 1830's, however, the white preachers had

<sup>17</sup>Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts and Jacob Payton, 3 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 2:591.

<sup>18</sup>Asbury, *Journal*, 2:284.

<sup>19</sup>Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: A Northside View of Slavery*. (Boston, 1856), pp. 234-35, quoted by Raboteau, p. 293.

<sup>20</sup>Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, p. 411, quoted by Raboteau, p. 166.

become known as pillars of support for the institution of slavery and the virtual agents of the planters in their effort to control black religious life. Also by this time many white ministers were themselves slaveholders who did not question slavery either on legal or on Christian grounds. At best some ministers saw slavery as a transitional institution meant to guide blacks to eventual freedom. The Reverend Rev. John H. Witherspoon expressed a typical opinion:

I have been from my youth up, opposed to slavery as it exists in the South, on the score of expediency. Nothing has so prostrated our Southern country in point of domestic improvement as slavery.

And yet I believe African slavery, lawful & not unchristian, and that is better for them, on the whole, than liberty without a due preparation for the reception of the blessing.

Some may attribute this view to selfish motives but I have nothing to gain from it. I never willingly and heartily bought or sold a human being. I have done so, for the accomodation of the slave & my own domestic peace and comfort but never for gain, from the love of filthy lucre.<sup>21</sup>

White preachers often delivered sermons with complete disregard for the limits of the slaves' education.<sup>22</sup> More contemptible was the blatant racism of some ministers who blindly served the slavemaster's interest: "You slaves will go to heaven if you are good, but don't ever think that you will be close to your mistress or master. No! No! there will be a wall between you; but there will be holes in it that permit you to look out and see you mistress when she passes by. If you want to sit behind the wall, you must do the language of the text 'Obey your masters' "<sup>23</sup>

It is not surprising that the slaves recognized and rejected the transparent attempt by whites to use Christianity as a tool to break the slaves' spirit and to make them more docile. One of the favorite scriptural passages of the white preachers was St. Paul's Epistle to Philemon in which he recounts how he sent Onesimus, a runaway slave, back to his master, Philemon. The Reverend Charles Colcock Jones related how he used the passage in a sermon to instill obedience in the slaves, and how they reacted to it:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle to Philemon; and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul condemned the practice of running away, one-half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others, that it was not the Gospel; others, that I preached to please the masters; others, that they did not care if they never heard me preach again.<sup>24</sup>

The antebellum reform movement included both a major effort to convert the slaves and a reaction which attempted to further reinforce the institution of slavery. Therefore, blacks were simultaneously drawn into the predominant form of Southern Christianity while at the same time they were repulsed by the hypocrisy of most Christian slaveholders and white preachers. The development of a black Baptist-Methodist configuration, which reflected the structure of Southern white Christianity, did

<sup>21</sup>Quoted by Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 203.

<sup>22</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 204.

<sup>23</sup>John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20 (July 1935), p. 329, quoted by Raboteau, p. 213.

<sup>24</sup>Jones, *Religious Instruction*, p. 126, quoted by Wilmore, p. 9.

not prevent the formation of an increasingly separate white and black religious experience. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, blacks generally worshipped in mixed congregations with segregated seating, and black preachers were allowed to preach. In the antebellum period, however, black preachers were severely restricted, and blacks and whites were divided into separate congregations. This separation was generally desired by both parties since blacks did not want to worship with whites (i.e. be subjected to the Christian pro-slavery ideology) any more than whites wanted to worship with blacks. The invisible institution, therefore, was fundamentally the rejection by blacks of white religion in general and white hypocrisy in particular. The period from 1830-1860 marked the wholesale conversion of the African slaves to Christianity, but it does not indicate the wholesale acceptance of white religion by blacks.

Generally, the effect of conversion varied with each individual slave. Some were radicalized by their conversion. The three leaders of the principal nineteenth century slave revolts, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, were all deeply influenced by the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. It is difficult to conceive of these men conspiring to lead the slaves in revolt without considering the influence of religion.

At the other end of the spectrum many slaves certainly accepted the docile role developed for them by their masters and white preachers. C.C. Jones, in contrast to the religious rebel, Nat Turner, offered the example of a "truly religious" Negro:

I shall never forget the remark of a venerable colored preacher made with reference to the South Hampton tragedy. With his eyes filled with tears, and his whole manner indicating the deepest emotion, said he, 'Sir, it is the Gospel that we ignorant and wicked people need. If you will give us the Gospel it will do more for the obedience of servants and the peace of the community than all your guards, and guns, and bayonets. This same Christian minister, on receiving a packet of inflammatory pamphlets through the Post-office. . . immediately called upon the Mayor of the City and delivered them into his hands.'<sup>25</sup>

The majority of slaves neither led revolts nor wallowed in self debasement. They resisted the attempt of white preachers who tried to convince blacks that they had been destined by God to be slaves to the white man, and that their primary Christian duty was to obey their masters. But the slaves were not fools and they certainly were not suicidal, knowing that open resistance was futile. Their ultimate resistance lay in an independent spirit, which they refused to abandon despite massive intimidation and often horrendous punishment, sustained by their trust in a heaven where each person would be equal before God.

Prayer was an effective form of resistance, especially against Christian masters who recognized its power. Slaves resisted and sometimes defied their masters' order to pray for the Confederacy. One observer perceived the importance of this battle of wills:

The prayers of the poor slaves, are proven to have had great value, in the minds of their Master, in scores of ways. They argued, and begged, coaxed and threatened, broke up meetings, punished, to make them pray 'fo' de confederates.' It is proven to have been so from the fact that so many refer to it, as a known fact in so many incidental ways; for instance—'Massah say, we pray for de war, say we shouldn't, mus' pray for de

<sup>25</sup>Jones, *Religious Instruction*, pp. 215-16, quoted by Raboteau, p. 164.

'fed'rates. We pray mo', pray harder. Den dey wouldn't let we hab meetin's, broke up de meetin's, but didn't broke our hearts, we pray mo' and mo', in de heart, night and day, and wait, for de Lord. . . Oh, we pray for de Lord to come, to hasten his work'. . . A deeply pious ex-slave said. . . 'I pray dat God bless you, and gib you success! Massah angry, but mus' pray for de comin' ob de Lord, an' his people.' Another said, 'I knew God would bless you, an give victory, I feel it when I pray. Massah angry 'cause I pray for de North, can't help it mus' pray for de whole worl.' Massah say, 'No! Pray for de 'fed'rates.' But I knew God would bless de North.<sup>26</sup>

Sometimes the resistance instilled by religion burst out from beneath the surface into a terrible thirst for revenge. Aggy, the housekeeper, one day expressed her outrage over the beating her master had given her daughter:

Thar's a day a-comin'! Thar's a day a-comin'. . . I hear de rumblin ob de chariots! I see de flashin' ob de guns! White folks blood is a-runnin' on de ground like a riber, an' de dead's heaped up dat high!. . . Oh, Lor'! hasten de day when de blows an' de bruises, an' de pains, shall come to de white folks, an' de buzzards shall eat 'em as dey's dead in de streets. Oh, Lor'! roll on de chariots, an' gib de black people rest an' peace. Oh, Lor'! gib me de pleasure ob livin' till dat day, when I shall see white folks shot down like de wolves when dey come hongry out o' de woods!<sup>27</sup>

The quintessential type of spiritual resistance, which whites were always powerless to overcome, was embodied in men like Andrew Bryan. Converted as a slave by George Liele, one of the first black preachers in the South, Bryan gathered a small group of followers in a suburb of Savannah, Georgia in the 1780's. Harassed by whites, Bryan was arrested, imprisoned twice and severely whipped. He reportedly "told his persecutors that he rejoiced not only to be whipped, but would freely suffer death for the cause of Jesus Christ." Finally embarrassed, the officials relented; Bryan and his followers were permitted to worship and his master allowed them to use his barn at Brampton. After his master's death, Bryan received his freedom and by 1790 his church, which became the First African Church of Savannah, numbered 225 full communicants and about 350 converts.<sup>28</sup> Through this kind of deep Christian commitment the slaves were able to resist white oppression, maintain their spirit and dignity, while they developed their own form of black spirituality.

Although it is correct to speak of black religion as a unique expression of Christianity, reflecting the black experience, it would be erroneous to imply that black religion developed outside the mainstream of Christianity. Similarly, it would be incorrect, indeed impossible, to try to reduce black religion to a few basic ideas. Nevertheless, there are some themes, shared by other Christians the world over, but either particularly stressed in black religion or else formulated in a unique way, which would be helpful in understanding some of the ways blacks differentiated and defined their religion.

Some of the themes of black religion, developed under the invisible institution, can be traced back to African origins. One of these was the relative absence of systematic theological discourse. This does not indicate that African religion lacks theological or moral content. Rather, it demonstrates the practical and experiential nature of African religion, ". . . in which the existence of a Supreme Being, the reality of the spirit world, and the revelatory significance of symbols and myths were all taken for

<sup>26</sup>A.M. French, *Slavery in South Carolina and the Ex-Slaves; or, The Port Royal Mission* (New York, 1862), pp. 133-34, quoted by Raboteau, p. 308.

<sup>27</sup>Mary A. Livermore, *My Story of the War* (Hartford, CT: 1889), pp. 260-61, quoted by Raboteau, p. 313.

<sup>28</sup>Raboteau, p. 141.

granted and required no explicit theological formulation in the western sense."<sup>29</sup> Black theology is, as we shall see, a modern term which developed largely out of the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960's.

Another theme, a dominant motive, of the religion of slaves was the place of joy and affirmation of life in their religious worship. The slaves were predisposed to express their faith through emotional conversion experiences, singing, shouting and dancing. This celebratory approach contrasted obviously with the dour Calvinism which pervaded Southern evangelicalism in the nineteenth century. Blacks were not escapists, however, and recognized their bountiful suffering. Spirituals such as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Had" reflected this theme of life's alternation between suffering and joy:

One morning I was walking down,  
I saw some berries hanging down,  
I pick de berry and I suck de juice,  
Just as sweet as the honey in de comb.  
Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down  
Sometimes I'm almost on de ground.<sup>30</sup>

African religion did not rigidly separate the natural and supernatural. The religion of the slaves, therefore, encompassed the Supreme Being, ancestors, spirits associated with natural phenomena, magic, conjure, and herbalism which formed a bridge between the natural and supernatural worlds.<sup>31</sup>

Other themes of black religion were more purely Christian in origin. Donald Mathews has identified three of them: equality, discipline, and deliverance.<sup>32</sup> No theme was more important to blacks than equality. Equality with the white man was, of course, impossible, but the egalitarian message of Christianity had great appeal for the slaves, and there was a strong sense of brotherhood among them. The importance of the conversion experience must be considered in light of this desire for equality. Through conversion the Holy Spirit touched the lives of each individual, offering salvation regardless of status and demonstrating the equality of all men, at least in the life after death. Eugene Genovese relates the confrontation between the three year old daughter of Fanny Kemble, the wife of a wealthy Georgia planter, and the maid: " 'Mary, some persons are free and some are not.' No reply. 'I am a free person. I say, I am a free person, Mary—do you know that?' Reply: 'Yessum, missus, here; I know it is so here, in this world.' "<sup>33</sup>

Discipline, or moral order, was vitally important to black religion, precisely because blacks found themselves trapped in a situation of moral anarchy. Blacks who were evangelized were quick to recognize white hypocrisy and just as quick to impose on themselves a gospel discipline which demonstrated their individual dignity and moral superiority. By becoming more Christian than whites, blacks could resist the terrible toll inflicted on them by a system of human bondage. There are countless stories of black discipline and white duplicity.<sup>34</sup> Josiah Henson was a trusted overseer, commissioned by his master to transport slaves from Maryland to Kentucky. Traveling along the Ohio River, he was repeatedly urged to cross over into free territory but refused to betray his master's trust. Later, his master reneged on a promise to let Henson buy his freedom and kept the \$350 that his slave had given him as a down payment. At this point, feeling that his moral obligation had ended, Henson

<sup>29</sup>Wilmore, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted by Raboteau, p. 259.

<sup>31</sup>Wilmore, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup>Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 216-228.

<sup>33</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 252.

<sup>34</sup>Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 227-28, Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 384-85, Raboteau, p. 303.

fled to Canada.

Deliverance was a powerful concept to an enslaved people. Of course Jesus was the central figure in the slave's Christianity. His persecution, death and ultimate triumph was not lost on a captive and helpless people. The Old Testament, particularly the saga of the Israelites in bondage, also captured the imagination of the slaves. One traveler heard freedmen singing these words during the Civil War:

Oh! Fader Abraham  
Go down into Dixie's land  
Tell Jeff Davis  
To let my people go.  
Down in de house of bondage  
Dey have watch and waited long,  
De oppressor's heel is heavy,  
De oppressor's arm is strong.  
Oh, Fader Abraham.<sup>35</sup>

Frederick Douglass noted that the line in the spiritual, "I am bound for the land of Canaan" meant going North to escape from slavery.<sup>36</sup> This Old Testament imagery which equated Canaan, The Promised Land, with freedom, made Moses as the leader of the Jewish Exodus, an inspirational symbol of perseverance.<sup>37</sup> By creating their own religious imagery, the Old Testament story of the enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians became their story, while the suffering of Jesus Christ became their suffering. Moses personified the slaves' desire for deliverance as a people, while Jesus became the means of delivering each of them from their sins to their own personal salvation.

Moses was also a powerful figure of leadership for blacks. George Briggs, a black preacher, commented: "Man learns right smart from Exodus 'bout how to lead. . . Moses still the strongest impression dat we has as rulers. God gits His-self into de heads of men dat He wants to rule and He don't tell nobody else nothing 'bout it neither."<sup>38</sup> Why then was there no black Moses?

Religion was so influential among the slaves because it provided them with their primary source of social cohesion. It was the religious leaders, the preachers, therefore, who were also the leaders of the black community. Some of these men were ordained ministers whose masters allowed them to pursue a ministerial career. Occasionally some were even freed to do God's work. Some were drivers, others just slaves who felt a calling to preach the word. None had very extensive, if any, training. Despite the many handicaps, the black preachers held the slaves together spiritually, taught them to value themselves, to love one another, and to trust in ultimate deliverance.

With very few exceptions these preachers did not fulfill the role of a black Moses. One black Baptist minister, Nat Turner, "Ole Prophet Nat," did take on some of the aura of a militant messiah, but his fate provides the best clue for the more passive role of the black preachers. Black religion was not messianic, was not militantly millenarian, and did not seek to transform life on earth. Millenarianism is associated with movements of mixed political and religious elements which promise a radically different society linked to the thousand year reign of perfect order associated with Christ's Second Coming. Millenarianism in black religion is complex.<sup>39</sup> Basically, sources such as the spirituals

<sup>35</sup>Quoted by Raboteau, p. 249.

<sup>36</sup>Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1962), pp. 159-60 (first pub. 1892).

<sup>37</sup>"De rough, rocky road what Moses done travel, I's bound to carry my soul to de Lawd; It's a mighty rocky road but I mos' done travel, And I's bound to carry my soul to de Lawd." Quoted by Raboteau, p. 256.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted by Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 253.

<sup>39</sup>See Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 266-79 for an excellent discussion.

promise deliverance and a final judgement, when the last would be first. Although this judgement was most often otherworldly in nature, at times, for example, during the Northern advance into the Confederacy, it could take on imminent and this worldly ramifications. Most scholars agree that under the slave regime black religion adopted a form of premillennial quietism, that is, they expected the Second Coming to precede the golden age, but awaited the intervention of Christ rather than trying to hasten it by violence.

There are several reasons why blacks adopted this attitude. Primarily, it was in recognition of the pervasiveness of the ruling white regime. The South was too stable, too strong and too united behind slavery to allow all but the slimmest hope of successful revolt. Furthermore, millennial movements are often the result of the clash of two civilizations. That confrontation was impossible in the Old South since blacks had lost so much of their African culture. Moreover, the evangelical ethos which the slaves imbibed stressed a personal reformation which was ill disposed towards the reconstruction of society as a whole. Finally, black religion was too life affirming, not ascetic enough, or willing to withdraw from the world to allow for the development of a revolutionary millenarianism. Eugene Genovese has noted that although blacks readily identified with the Israelites, they did not think of themselves as a chosen people. They did not develop the concept of collective guilt or the idea that their enslavement was punishment for their infidelity or immorality, as the Israelites had done. Blacks firmly believed that Jesus would deliver them, but did not hold that they had been chosen to bring his kingdom into this world.<sup>40</sup> What was missing was the concept of a national mission which could have functioned as the basis of a revolutionary ideology.

The black preachers faced the power of the Southern slavocracy with an attitude of realism not revolution. This represented not passivity but the will to survive. The slaves' religion was not suicidal, though it did constitute a form of resistance within accommodation. Black religion was what it could be, and while limited by white power it was always relevant to the everyday needs of black people.

The examination of certain themes of black religion implies differences between black and white forms of Southern religion. Of course it is no more possible to list all of the differences between white and black religion than it is to sum up succinctly the essence of either one. However, by discussing some of these differences, which were recognized historically by both blacks and whites, the special character of black Christianity can be better understood.

Even the most sympathetic whites looked upon blacks as sincere believers but excitable and emotional by nature, and who generally missed the subtleties if not some of the basic points of Christianity. Others, such as James Redpath, were ethnocentric, if not rabidly racist, and were repulsed by a black Christianity which did not conform to white criteria:

I have investigated the character of too many of the "pious negroes" to feel any respect either for their religion or their teachers. Church membership does not prevent fornication, bigamy, adultery, lying, theft, or hypocrisy. It is a cloak, in nine cases out of ten, which the slaves find convenient to wear, and in the exceptional case, it is a union of meaningless cant and wildest fanaticism. A single spark of true Christianity among the slave population would set the plantations in a blaze. Christianity and slavery cannot live together; but churchianity and slavery are twins.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 278-79.

<sup>41</sup>James Redpath, *The Roving Editor, Or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (New York, 1859), p. 260, quoted by Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 214.



Blacks were generally more charitable but no less insistent that they had to worship God in their own way. One ex-slave from Virginia, Henrietta Perry, said, "White folks can't pray right to de black man's God. Can't nobody do it for you. You got to call God yourself when de spirit tell you and let God know dat you bin washed free from sin." Another ex-slave, Anderson Jackson of South Carolina expressed his distrust of white religion, "I stays independent of what white folks tells me when I shouts. De spirit moves me every day, dat's how I stays in. White folks don't feel sech as I does; so dey stays out." One white preacher got it right when he observed: "Many of the blacks look upon white people as merely taught by the Book; they consider themselves instructed by the inspiration of the Spirit."<sup>42</sup>

The emphasis on the absolute and sometimes literal authority of the Bible, a primary attribute of Southern white evangelicalism, is one important divergence between Southern white and black religion. There is very little fundamentalism in black Christianity which instead has emphasized the Bible as a source of good advice for living a proper life, but only after individuals have received the Spirit and felt religion in their hearts.

Other white Christian concepts were also viewed differently by blacks. Booker T. Washington noted that there was no traditional Christian concept of future reward or punishment, no heaven or hell in African religion. Blacks, therefore, developed very little sense, or at least a very different sense of sin.<sup>43</sup> Such a difference affected the formation of black Christian morality.

There was very little acceptance of original sin in slave religion. Perhaps this rejection is linked to the heavy handed attempts by whites to link blacks' servitude to collective guilt and predestination, the oft-stated idea that slavery was preordained by God as punishment for blacks' sins. Blacks steadfastly refused to accept the principle that their race had been created to be the white man's slave and they disdained much of the dour Calvinism which laced nineteenth-century white evangelicalism. Both races may have preached the Bible in a fiery style, but whites were fiery mad, while blacks were fiery glad. In a sense whites were broken down by preaching while blacks were lifted up. The most obvious reason for this difference was that whites were brought down by their individual and subjective sense of guilt, while blacks, already brought down by the objective misery of bondage, were lifted up in self esteem by a sense of Christian community and the promise of deliverance and salvation.

Blacks, at least according to whites, lived by a different morality. For example, whites assumed that all blacks stole by nature. A "thieving negro" was simply one who stole more than average.<sup>44</sup> The slaves did steal, mostly food, from their masters. Partly this was payment for the hypocrisy of their master's Christianity, partly as a means of survival because of the inadequate food provided. But the slaves also liked to distinguish between *stealing* among themselves and *taking* from their masters. With obvious relish, they applied with rigorous logic the basic assumption of slavery, that they were chattel, possessions of their masters. How then could one possession steal another? Taking and eating the master's pig, for example, was not stealing, since that represented only the transformation of one possession into another.

White preachers constantly lamented the slaves' antinomianism. Methodist bishop William Capers remarked that "the prevalent conceit that sin is sin for white men not negroes. . . [held] a fond control over them."<sup>45</sup> Blacks were willing to accept the white man's God, but not the white man's

<sup>42</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 214.

<sup>43</sup>"The Religious Life of the Negro," *North American Review* 181 (1905): 20-21, reprinted in Hart Nelsen, et al, eds., *Black Church in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 40-41.

<sup>44</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, p. 599.

<sup>45</sup>Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism; A Chapter in American Morality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 76.

morality, which they saw him violate every day. As hard as he tried, the white preacher, Charles Stearns, could not convince blacks to accept the white moral code:

I have known whole platoons to arise, and leave their seats and not return to the place of worship, when stealing was touched upon in the mildest manner. And it is a common remark among them, 'we would go and hear Mr. S[tearns] preach much oftener, if he would leave off preaching against lying and stealing, and preach the gospel.' . . . they were always ready to hear about God, and living with him in heaven, but seldom wished to hear of their duties to each other. After the close of the meeting, I was waited upon at my house by a deputation of the brethren, who gravely informed me that my sermon had given great offense, and the people were determined to abandon the Sunday school meeting, if I persisted in talking about such worldly matters. When I informed them that I could not desist from denouncing the sins they were guilty of, one of them persuasively said, 'Now Mr. S., if you must talk about stealing, why not call us together on Monday and tell us about it, and let us have a good heavenly time on Sunday, in worshipping the God we all love so much'. . . It matters not what sin they may be guilty of, their confidence in their acceptance with God is unshaken. They said, 'God is not like man, and he is not going to punish us for every little sin.'<sup>46</sup>

Stearns only dimly perceived that black's antinomianism was rooted in their rejection of hypocritical white morality, and in their assurance of election. While they chose selectively, blacks could be rock-ribbed Calvinists. Olmstead recounted one incident of slave assurance:

A slave, who was 'a professor,' plagued his master very much by his persistence in certain immoral practices, and he requested a clergyman to converse with him and try to reform him. The clergyman did so, and endeavored to bring the terrors of the law to bear upon his conscience. 'Look yeah, massa,' said the backslider, 'don't de Scriptur say, 'Dem who believes an is baptize shall be save?'"Certainly,' the clergyman answered; and went on to explain and expound the passage: but directly the slave interrupted him again. 'Jus you tell me now, massa, don't de good book say dese word: Dem as believes and is baptize, shal be save;"want to know dat.' 'Yes but—" 'Dat's all I want to know, sar; now what's de use o' talkin' to me? You aint goin to make me bleve what de blessed Lord says, an't so, not ef you tries forever.' The clergyman again attempted to explain, but the negro would not allow him, and as often as he got back to the judgement day, or charging him with sin, and demanding reformation, he would interrupt him in the same way. 'De Scriptur say, if a man believe and be baptize he shall-he *shall* be save. Now, massa minister, I *done* believe and I *done* baptize, and I shall be save suah. —Dere's no use talkin, sar.'<sup>47</sup>

We have come upon what is perhaps the most essential element of the invisible institution. It is something which no amount of white proselytization and propaganda could have ever instilled in black Americans. It is faith.

John Jasper (1812-1901) was one of the most famous black preachers of the nineteenth century. He was the son of slaves, his father was a preacher and his mother was a nurse and driver over women on the plantation in Fluvanna County, Virginia. Jasper "thusted fer de bread uv learnin'" and his prayers were answered while he was still a young man, when he found himself rooming with a fellow

<sup>46</sup>Charles Stearns, *The Black Man of the South and the Rebels* (New York, 1872), pp. 355, 373-74, 381, quoted by Raboteau, p. 299.

<sup>47</sup>Frederick Olmstead, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), pp. 123-24 (first pub. 1856).

slave who was able to teach him how to read. Shortly thereafter he experienced a conversion and as Jasper himself related: "Sence dat time I ain't keer'd 'bout nuthin' 'cept ter study an 'preach de Word uv God." Jasper founded what developed into an enormous congregation in Richmond, and he traveled throughout the United States on speaking tours.

Jasper's most famous piece of oratory became known as "The Sun Do Move an' de Earth am Square" sermon. The sermon, whenever preached, regularly drew large crowds, both black and white. Undoubtedly many went for amusement, to laugh at the ignorant old simpleton's malapropisms. But as Dr. William Hatcher, pastor of the Grace Street Baptist Church (white) and biographer of Jasper, told it, so many scoffers went away deeply moved and convinced by Jasper's sincerity and eloquence.

Jasper was a master of disguised meaning. He was no firebrand, yet he was able to communicate to his people in ways which undoubtedly escaped most whites. On one level, Jasper's sermon is concerned with nothing less than refuting the Copernican theory of a heliocentric universe. He dismisses all of the scientists and "furloferfurs" who have tried to convince him that his views are unscientific. What makes his argument so plausible is that he wisely controls the parameters of his discourse. "Out'n de Bible I knows nuthin' extry 'bout de sun," in this way he limits the discussion, and focuses not on scientific discoveries but the veracity of the Bible. According to Jasper it is the scientists who must prove that the Bible is not correct. As he says: "Dey is on der wrong side of de Bible, an' dar's whar de trubble comes wid 'em."<sup>48</sup>

Not surprisingly, much of Jasper's sermon ties in with the familiar theme of the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt. Led by Joshua, they have just entered the promised land and have taken the cities of Jericho and Ai. Encouraged by these successes, the Gibeonites allied themselves with the Israelites, and subsequently found themselves under attack by the five Amorite kings. Joshua rushed headlong to assist his allies, defeating the Amorites at Gibeon. In order to complete his vengeance, Joshua asked God to grant him more daylight, and so God made the sun stand still.<sup>49</sup> As Jasper reasoned, the sun could not be stopped if it did not move around the earth. The story of King Hezekiah was still more convincing, since in this case God actually moved the sun back ten degrees.<sup>50</sup> Regarding his assertion that the earth is square, Jasper cited Revelation 7:1 which mentions four angels sitting on the four corners of the earth. With abundant common sense, Jasper concluded that only square objects could have corners.

At this point it might seem that Jasper was espousing a strict fundamentalism against the discoveries of scientists. While this may be true on the surface, it was not Jasper's real intent. Just a few lines from where he finished citing all of his Biblical authorities, Jasper revealed that he was not so much concerned with the sun as with the Word of the Lord. A little further on he begins to get to the real point of his sermon:

What I keer about de sun? De day comes on wen de sun will be called frum his race-trac, and his light squincked out foruvur; de moon shall turn ter blood, and this yearth be konsoomed wid fier. Let um go; dat wont skeer me nor trubble Gord's erlect'd peopul, for de word uv de Lord shell aindu furivur, an' on dat Solid Rock we stan' an' shall not be muved.<sup>51</sup>

Jasper then cites Malachi 1:11, which also speaks of the rising of the sun, but within the context of

<sup>48</sup>William Hatcher, *John Jasper, The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), pp. 135-142 (first pub. 1908).

<sup>49</sup>Joshua 10:1-15.

<sup>50</sup>II Kings 20:1-11.

<sup>51</sup>Hatcher, p. 144.

the spreading of the name of the Lord. This will not be complete until the second coming of Christ and then neither the sun nor any other celestial body will matter, all will be faced with the prospect of salvation.

Oh, my bruddrin, wat er time dat will be. My soul teks wing es I erticipate wid joy dat der merlinium day! De glories as dey shine befo' my eyes blin's me, an' I furgits de sun an' moon an' stars. I jes' 'members dat 'long 'bout dose las' days dat de sun an moon will go out uv bizness, fur dey won' be needed no mo'. Den will King Jesus come back ter see His people an' He will be de suffishunt light uv de wurl'. Joshwer's bat'ls will be ovur. Hezekier woan't need no sun diul, an' de sun an' moon will fade out befo' de glorijs splendurs of de New Jerusalem.<sup>53</sup>

Jasper concludes his sermon with as good a summary of the essence of black religion under the invisible institution as can be found. He speaks of salvation and he addresses other blacks, "his own brutherin." Do not be concerned with the sun or stars, put your faith in Jesus, "doan't hitch yer hopes to no sun nor stars; yer home is got Jesus fer its light. . .". Honor the Lord's Word, remember the suffering of Calvary, trust in the Lamb, and your sufferings on earth will be over and "we shall see de King in His glory an' be at ease."<sup>54</sup> Here then is a formulation of traditional black religion: a simple trust in God, acceptance of his Word, a Jesus-centered faith, a conviction of God's care and concern for each individual, a hope for deliverance from the suffering of this world, and a longing for the joys of salvation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Hatcher, p. 149.

<sup>54</sup>Hatcher, p. 149.

<sup>54</sup>This is, of course, only one of many possible formulations. Another worth mentioning is the list of contributions made by African religions compiled by Wilmore (p. 239). "A profound sense of the pervasive reality of the spirit world above and beneath the artifactual world; the blotting out of the line between the sacred and profane; the practical use of religion in all of life; the surrender of excessive individualism for solidarity with the community and with nature; reverence for the ancestors and their real and symbolic presence with the living to guide and inspire; the source of evil in the consequences of an act rather than in the act itself; the corporateness of society and all life; the creative employment of rhythm, singing and dancing in the celebration of life and the worship of the Creator."

### 3.

## The Organized Black Church

**M**OST SCHOLARS have recognized the importance of religion to blacks and the critical role that the institution of the church has played in the black community. In their classic study, Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson noted the crucial function of the black church in history, even well before emancipation:

[The black church] furnished the one and only organized field in which the slave's suppressed emotions could be released, and the only opportunity for him to develop his own leadership. In almost every other area, he was completely suppressed. Thus, through a slow and difficult process, often involving much suffering and persecution, the Negro, more than three-quarters of a century prior to emancipation, through initiative, zeal, and ability, began to achieve the right to be free in his church.<sup>1</sup>

W.E.B. DuBois, who was not uncritical of the black church, also recognized its central role as "the social center of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character."<sup>2</sup> Finally, E. Franklin Frazier, who wrote a scathing criticism of the "Negro Church", nevertheless included a grudging acknowledgement of its influence:

. . .the Negro church has affected the entire intellectual development and outlook of Negroes. This has been due both to the influence of the Negro church which has permeated every phase of social life and to the influence of the Negro preacher whose authoritarian personality and anti-intellectualism has cast a shadow over the intellectual outlook of the Negroes.<sup>3</sup>

Whether members of the black church, or secular critics of the institution, most observers recognize that the organized black church has had a profound effect on the lives of black Americans. Moreover, the founding of individual black churches and denominations is very much a part of the history of black religion. These institutions reflect both the experience of discrimination in white society and the aspirations of blacks for freedom and control over their own lives. In short then, the organized black church reflects the entire black experience far more comprehensively than white churches do the white experience.

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<sup>1</sup>Mays and Nicholson, p.3.

<sup>2</sup>Du Bois, "Of the Faith of Our Fathers," p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>Frazier, Negro Church, p. 47.

The principal reasons for the establishment of organized black churches in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were discrimination and racial consciousness. Generally, these factors operated within a congregation or a limited geographical area. Black churches then, even those which became national in scope, often originated in a single act by a person or group of persons.

Richard Allen was born a slave in Philadelphia in 1760.<sup>4</sup> He and his family were sold to a planter living near Dover, Delaware, where he grew up. Converted in 1777, Allen became a minister three years later. He was able to purchase his freedom and while working at menial tasks he traveled the Baltimore circuit and received preaching assignments from the Methodist Bishop, Francis Asbury himself. Returning to Philadelphia in 1786, Allen was invited to preach at the St. George Methodist Episcopal Church. It was within the walls of St. George's that the African Methodist Episcopal Church was born out of white prejudice. These are Allen's own words:

A number of us usually attended St. George's church in Fourth Street; and when the colored people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved us from the seats we usually sat on, and placed us around the wall, and on Sabbath morning we went to church and the sexton stood at the door and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun, and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said "Let us pray." We had not been long upon our knees before I heard a considerable scuffling and low talking, I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H—— M——, having hold of Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying, "You must get up—you must not kneel here." Mr. Jones replied, "Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." With that he beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L—— S—— to come to his assistance. He came to William White, to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church. This raised a great excitement and inquiry among the citizens, in so much that I believe that they were ashamed of their conduct. . . we had subscribed largely towards finishing St. George's church, in building the gallery and laying the new floors, and just as the house was made comfortable, we were turned out from enjoying the comforts of worship therein.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their disgust with white hypocrisy, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones remained remarkably loyal to Wesleyanism and did not immediately found a new church. Instead, they established a Christian association, the Free African Society, which was similar to the United Societies founded by Wesley in England. The Society created the classic pattern for the black church in the United States. Both religious and secular, it focused on the free and autonomous worship in the black religious tradition and on the solidarity and social welfare of the black community.<sup>6</sup>

Within a few years though, it was decided to establish a church, and the Society split, Jones becoming a pastor of St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church and Allen assuming the pastorate of the Bethel Church, where Francis Asbury himself preached the first sermon. Allen was ordained deacon by Asbury in 1799, and later attained the status of elder. Over the next decade other similarly independent African churches were established in Baltimore; Wilmington; Attleboro, Pennsylvania; and Salem, New Jersey. In 1816 the leaders of these various churches met in Philadelphia and

<sup>4</sup>Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders: 1755-1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), pp. 25-40.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, n.d.), pp. 21-22, quoted by Mays and Nicholson, p. 21-22.

<sup>6</sup>Wilmore, p. 82-83

established the African Methodist Episcopal Church, electing Allen its bishop. Growth was swift, membership approaching 6,000 in Philadelphia and Baltimore alone by 1822.<sup>7</sup> Churches were established throughout the Northeast, and into the South, before regulations restricting free Negro churches there were established following the Denmark Vesey revolt.

Similar events in New York City gave rise to a second black Methodist denomination. Although the situation was somewhat less hostile in New York than in Philadelphia, relations were strained between the black and white members of the John Street Church. The familiar debate over where blacks could sit emphasized the fact that blacks were relegated to second class status in the church. In 1796 a group of black Methodists were granted permission by Bishop Asbury to hold separate meetings in the church's edifice, under the supervision of white Methodists. In 1799 the black Methodists decided to build a separate church, purchased property, and erected the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church the following year.

Over the next two decades the Zion Church was battered by a series of schisms and disputes. Because their split with the white church was less acrimonious than it had been in Philadelphia, the Zionites were less cohesive and they continued to debate reuniting with the whites or joining the Allenites. Finally, in 1820 they resolved to establish a separate denomination and sought ordination and consecration from some Christian church. Denied these services by the Episcopal Church and by two conferences of the Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church finally elected a number of elders, organized a national body in 1821 and in the following year elected James Varick its first Bishop.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, most black Baptist churches were also established by the withdrawal of black members from a white dominated church. Sometimes where blacks constituted a large majority it was the whites who withdrew. Most often these withdrawals were accomplished with the mutual consent of both blacks and whites.<sup>9</sup>

The first black Baptist church was founded by one Mr. Palmer at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, across the river from Augusta, Georgia some time between 1773 and 1775.<sup>10</sup> This group was under the protection of a kind master, George Galphin, who permitted first George Liele and then David George, both blacks, to preach to the congregation. Galphin, a patriot, fled the British, allowing David George and some of Galphin's slaves to go over to the British in Savannah where they were freed. George travelled to Canada and eventually to Sierra Leone where he founded the first Baptist church in that African country. George Liele was born a slave in Virginia about the year 1750. He was soon brought to Georgia where he attended a Baptist church with his master. Demonstrating a real dedication to religion and a talent for preaching, Liele's master freed him so that he could dedicate himself to the ministry. During the Revolutionary War Liele's master was killed and Liele was imprisoned by the heirs of the estate who attempted to reenslave him. Rescued by the British Commander, Colonel Kirkland, who was occupying the city, Liele reorganized the remnants of the Silver Bluff Church into the first black Baptist church of Savannah. In 1782, when the British withdrew from the city, Liele followed and continued his career in Jamaica.

Before George Liele left Savannah he had baptized Andrew Bryan and others. Bryan, a slave born in South Carolina in 1737, eventually obtained his freedom and established the First African Baptist Church of Savannah in 1788, which within two years numbered 225 full communicants and 350 converts.

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<sup>7</sup>Woodson, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup>Woodson, pp. 67-73.

<sup>9</sup>Mays and Nicholson, pp. 23-24.

<sup>10</sup>Woodson, p. 35.

Andrew Marshall, Bryan's nephew, became pastor of the First African Baptist Church of Savannah in 1815 and by 1830 his congregation numbered 2,417.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the North, it was extremely difficult to establish free black churches in the South, especially after 1830. Those few that were independent (and all black churches in general) experienced increasing pressure to conform to strict white supervision. Marshall's church underwent just such a crisis when the pastor allowed Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ, to preach to the congregation. Campbell's divergent ideas and the fact that Marshall gave the impression that he agreed with them, provoked a rapid division in the congregation. Marshall and the majority of the members left the church.

When the Sunbury Baptist Association (white) learned of the controversy, in 1832, a committee was appointed to investigate. It promptly recommended not only that Marshall be silenced for heterodoxy, but also that the First African Church be dissolved and reconstituted as a branch of the white Baptist church. In fact, it recommended that all African churches in the area be reconstituted as parts of white churches, and transmitted these resolutions to the state legislature and the mayor of Savannah. Basically, the confrontation pitted the Baptist polity, which denied associations any juridical power over the individual churches, against the various slave laws which were being tightened precisely at this time. These laws insured the rights of whites to sit in on black conferences and all other meetings, provided for the licensing of black preachers by white ministers, and restricted black ownership of property under a system of perpetual white trusteeship.<sup>12</sup>

Recognizing the political necessity of fellowship with the white association, the First African Church responded to the resolutions of the Sunbury Association by agreeing to place itself under the control of the white Savannah Baptist Church. However, the African Church insisted on certain conditions designed to protect their fundamental autonomy, including: "That we be independent in our meetings, that is, we receive and dismiss our own members, and elect and dismiss our own officers, and finally, manage our own concerns independently. . ."<sup>13</sup>

The lines of dispute clearly drawn; the battle was to be fought over the status of Andrew Marshall. In January 1833 a committee from the white Savannah Baptist Church advised the First African Church that the ministry of Marshall should be severely curtailed, admonishing him not to preach or to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. A month later the black Baptists refused to comply, stating that Marshall had been called back to his post and would take up his pastoral duties. The white committee appealed to the white trustees of the black church and to the city authorities to shut down the First African Church. The committee was not very subtle in its appeal to the racist paternalism of whites noting that "the individuals composing the First African Church are in part the property of our citizens, and it is for them, if they feel any interest in their everlasting or temporal welfare, to interpose and save them from the baneful influence of a designing man."<sup>14</sup> John Williamson, writing on behalf of the white trustees, successfully attacked the right of the committee to interfere in the affairs of an independent Baptist church, defended Marshall against unproven charges of heresy, and insisted that the church remain open, upholding the religious privileges of blacks.

After being rejected the two previous years, the First African Church was admitted to the Sunbury Association in 1837, after Marshall specifically renounced the ideas of Alexander Campbell. Due to the determination and astuteness of the congregation, Andrew Marshall remained as minister and the autonomy of the church was largely preserved.

<sup>11</sup>Raboteau, p. 189.

<sup>12</sup>Raboteau, pp. 189-190.

<sup>13</sup>Rev. E.K. Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church* (Savannah, GA, 1888), pp. 12-13, quoted by Raboteau, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup>Love, pp. 23-24, quoted by Raboteau, p. 193.



The freedom to control their religious lives was extremely important to blacks in both the North and the South.<sup>15</sup> In Savannah it was the tradition of the independence of the local Baptist church which provided black Baptists with the means of preserving their autonomy. The desire for protection from white domination, which was more effectively supplied by the Baptist polity, is perhaps the best explanation for why the majority of black Americans eventually chose to become members of Baptist churches. Finally, the identification of religion with freedom was further influenced by free blacks who were the founders of most of the independent black churches and Northern denominations. They were the moral and social leaders of black society. Personally free, but still subject to racial discrimination, the freemen were dedicated abolitionists deeply committed to freedom for their black bretheren.<sup>16</sup> As leaders of the free church movement these men gave a special impetus to the identification of black religion with the freedom of the black church.

It was in the period of consolidation following the Civil War that the black church was fully established. After emancipation blacks were allowed to organize independent churches and the Northern free churches engaged in a vigorous evangelization effort. Statistics compiled by Nicholson and Mays reveal that 223 of the 609 urban churches and 110 of the 185 rural churches which they studied originated during the years 1866 to 1899. Of the 223 urban churches, 12 percent originated through splits from other churches, 10 percent began as mission churches, and 63 percent were the result of the initiative of individuals or groups. Of the 110 rural churches, 82 percent were the result of individual or group initiative.<sup>17</sup> These figures indicate above all that the freedom to establish and control individual churches was the major impetus of this consolidation period.

The period also marked the merger of the invisible institution with the institutional churches of the free Negroes. The most obvious consequences of this merger was the rapid growth in the size of the black church organization. Furthermore, now that the organized black church was so much larger it had a greater affect on the lives of black Americans. The merger had an even more profound effect, it united the spirituality, the theology, morality, singing and other forms of worship of the invisible institution, with the emphasis on freedom characteristic of the Northern independent churches. The result is the typical and traditional black church configuration, Baptist and Methodist in organization, with a unique black style, and with a distinct attitude towards political and social issues.

One black denomination which originated in the postbellum period was the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church had separated over the issue of slavery and a Southern group, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South was established. By 1860 there were 207,766 blacks and 533,743 whites in the ME Church, South.<sup>18</sup> Six years later though, the number of blacks in the Church had plummeted to 78,742 or 38 percent of the previous total. Much of this decline can be attributed to the fact that many of the freed slaves had simply picked up and left or were dislocated in the chaos of the closing days of the Civil War, and were no longer on the rolls. Others had been lured away by the evangelization effort of the black and white Northern Methodist bodies.

Most of the ex-slaves who remained in the ME Church, South wanted and expected to establish some type of separate religious institution. The "Colored Methodists" asserted themselves in the type of Church they desired. For example, they rejected African Methodism out of their perception that

<sup>15</sup>The founding of Northern Baptist churches such as the African Baptist Church on Joy Street, in Boston, and the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, follow the familiar pattern. Both reflect the ardent desire of blacks to exercise control over their own religious lives. See Woodson, pp. 76-77.

<sup>16</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of the Faith of Our Fathers," p. 35.

<sup>17</sup>Mays and Nicholson, pp. 29-30.

<sup>18</sup>This entire section on the CME Church is based on *The History of the CME Church*, by Othal Lakey (Memphis: CME Publishing House, 1985), pp. 101-224.

the African Churches were not quite regular Wesleyan bodies and out of a disillusionment with Northern blacks who tended to look down on the freedmen. There was also a certain affinity for Southern whites which helped to persuade blacks to remain in the ME Church, South, at least for the time being. In the complex relationship between the races and under the influence of the paternalism which pervaded this relationship came an expectation among blacks that certain kindnesses were due them from their former masters. Similarly, most whites felt a certain moral obligation to help guide their former charges in their new-found independence.

By the end of the 1866 Session of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South there was a general consensus among the bishops that virtually all blacks would eventually withdraw from the white body. The question which remained was how was this separation to take place?

The 1866 General Conference approved a two part plan to create a separate black Methodist body. The first part authorized an orderly plan of development in which black preachers were granted full ecclesiastical privileges. The plan also stated the intention to create all of the various organizations of the Methodist polity of the time, culminating in a separate black General Conference Jurisdiction, as advisable.

A few days later a second report was approved which contained an altogether different plan of action. This report recommended that the trustees of local congregations be advised to allow the African Methodist Episcopal Church the use of church property if so desired, and foresaw the possibility of some sort of merger between the two Churches some time in the future.

Over the next four years the progress in implementing the first part of the 1866 plan was remarkable. The 1870 General Conference of the ME Church, South decided not to approve a separate jurisdiction but rather to establish an entirely separate Church for blacks. The reason for this change was mostly political. In 1866, under the relatively generous terms of Reconstruction envisioned by Lincoln, a separate black conference under the authority of Southern white bishops was possible. Four years later, however, with a Reconstruction fashioned by radical Republicans which disenfranchised much of the traditional Southern ruling class, enfranchised blacks and organized them to support the Republican party, sufficient and growing hostility between the races made a separate church inevitable.

Similarly, by 1870 the AME Church had clearly "gone over to the other side" of Northern Carpetbaggers and Southern Scalawags. It was, therefore, impossible to turn over ME Church, South property to the Northern black denomination. Instead, the property in question was turned over to the CME Church. Finally, an official delegation of the ME Church, South was appointed to help guide the fledgling Colored Methodists in forming their own General Conference.

By the end of 1870 an organizing General Conference was held in Jackson, Tennessee. A new black Methodist Church consisting of five annual conferences and choosing the name Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was born. Two black bishops were elected and consecrated by two white bishops from the ME Church, South. The organization of the new Church was a remarkable feat accomplished by the skill and determination of a group of ex-slaves who had had no previous organizational experience. It was a Church which was black in identity, Southern in scope, Methodist in organization, and legally constituted out of an authentic Wesleyan body.

Originally a purely Southern institution, the CME church has followed the pattern of twentieth-century black migration and now has conferences covering thirty-nine states. In 1954 the denomination changed its name to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Together, the AME,

AME Zion and the CME Churches comprise the large majority of black Methodists.<sup>19</sup>

The greater part of blacks became Baptists after emancipation. The autonomy, the democracy, and the ease of establishing Baptist churches were all factors which help explain this predilection. Of the 1,075 churches in seven Southern cities surveyed in 1933, 661 or 61.5 percent of the churches were Baptist, fifteen other denominations constituted the remaining 414 or 38.5 percent of the churches.<sup>20</sup> This proliferation of churches was certainly beneficial, though not completely so. The large numbers of churches probably meant that blacks were (and perhaps still are) overchurched. This severely strained the finances of many smaller churches, too small to adequately support the mission of the church. Furthermore, the opportunities to establish new churches sometimes attracted men to the ministry who had been frustrated by discrimination from pursuing political or business careers, who were ill educated, or otherwise not well suited for the ministry.<sup>21</sup>

Of course the slaves were not permitted to form free associations before emancipation, but freemen in the North could and did form Baptist organizations. The first attempt to organize black Baptists beyond the local church was the Providence Baptist Association organized in Ohio in 1836. A second was the Wood River Baptist Association of Illinois. Both of these were constituted largely by slaves who had run away to the free territory of the Northwest. In 1840 the American Baptist Missionary Convention was organized by the black Baptists who lived in the New England and Middle Atlantic States. Following the Civil War and emancipation, state conventions were organized in Louisiana in 1865, North Carolina in 1866, and in Alabama and Virginia the following year. Most Southern states had black Baptist state conventions by 1870. The Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention was organized in 1866 through the merger of the Northwestern Convention and the American Baptist Missionary Convention. By 1877 the Convention reported an enrollment of 600,000 in twenty-six states.<sup>22</sup>

The proliferation of black Baptist organizations continued with the founding of the Foreign Mission Convention in 1880. It was particularly concerned with the foreign missions, especially in Africa. Less than six years later the American National Baptist Convention was organized in St. Louis, Missouri. It too was dedicated to the foreign mission enterprise and generally to the hope for the unification of all black Baptists in America. The Baptist National Educational Convention was organized in Washington, D.C. in 1893. Its chief interest was to provide for an educated ministry in the leadership of black Baptist churches.

A large degree of unity among American black Baptists was finally achieved with the founding of the National Baptist Convention in 1895. The convention was formed by the merger of the National Baptist Educational Convention, the Foreign Mission Convention, and the American National Baptist Convention. Five boards were established in the formative years of the Convention: a Foreign Mission Board, a Home Mission Board, an Educational Board, a Baptist Young People's Union Board, and a Publication Board.

Unity was short lived. The Lott Carey Baptist Home and Foreign Mission Convention was organized in Washington, D.C. in 1897. The debate which led to the formation of this convention centered on three issues: (1) the primacy of the foreign missions in the work of the convention; (2) the use of American Baptist literature and cooperation with white Baptists in general; (3) the advisability

<sup>19</sup>*The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1984* (Nashville, TN: 1984) contains the following church membership figures: African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2,210,000; African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 1,134,179; Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, 786,707.

<sup>20</sup>Mays and Nicholson, p. 209

<sup>21</sup>Woodson, pp. 175-77.

<sup>22</sup>*Encyclopedia of Black America*, W. Augustus Low, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), s.v. "Baptists."

of moving the Foreign Mission Board from Richmond to Louisville.<sup>23</sup>

In 1915 an even more serious division in black Baptist ranks occurred. Actually the entire decade prior to the split was filled with agitation and controversy. The dispute centered around the status of the Publishing Board and the strong leadership of Rev. R. H. Boyd who became the board's corresponding secretary. Basically, the question at hand was did the Convention own the Publishing Board? It was learned that the Publishing Board's operation had been built on Boyd's property and that the publications had been copyrighted in his name. Shortly thereafter, a Tennessee court declared the Publishing Board to be a legal entity and Boyd and his followers withdrew from the Convention with the board. By 1916 another Black Baptist Convention was organized, the National Baptist Convention of America. Because it was not actually incorporated until the 1930's, this group is sometimes referred to as the "Unincorporated Convention."<sup>24</sup>

Another division in the parent body, which is now known as the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Inc., developed in the 1950's. Part of the division revolved around the circumvention of a new four year tenure rule by the then President, Dr. Joseph H. Jackson. Attempts to unseat Jackson failed, and dissention was aggravated by divergent approaches towards the civil rights movement. Dr. Jackson and his supporters preferred a more gradual approach, while others, including Martin Luther King, Jr., favored a more activist opposition to the Jim Crow laws and other forms of discrimination. By 1962 another split in National Baptist ranks was institutionalized by the formation of the Progressive National Baptist Convention of America, Inc. which constitutes the third major black Baptist organization.<sup>25</sup>

In concluding this very brief examination of the organized black church, no better summary could be offered than the evaluation composed by one of the most distinguished products of that same church, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays. In the final chapter of his study, *The Negro's Church*, Dr. Mays spoke of "The Genius of the Negro Church." Written more than a half century ago, his words are still an accurate and perceptive appreciation of the soul of the black church.<sup>26</sup>

After acknowledging some of the failures and inadequacies of the black church, Mays begins to evaluate what the church has meant to the black race. The church has been one of the few organizations completely owned and controlled by blacks. To a race which has traditionally had no voice, or at best a very limited voice in most American institutions, this has been a unique and highly prized accomplishment.

The church has been a symbol of black consciousness, but it has also been a source of opportunity to the common man. It has been a training ground in which black men and women as deacons, Sunday school teachers, and members of the choir have affirmed their identity, received recognition, and developed their pride and self respect. Black political leadership has always drawn heavily from the ranks of church leaders. Richard Harvey Cain, later a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, edited a Republican newspaper in 1868, was elected a member of the Reconstruction constitutional convention in South Carolina, and served two terms in Congress, beginning in 1879.<sup>27</sup> The Rev. Jesse Jackson is just the latest of a long line of black ministers who answered "the call of

<sup>23</sup>Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman, 1985), pp. 84-85.

<sup>24</sup>Fitts, pp. 89-95.

<sup>25</sup>Membership figures provided by *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1984* for each of the three major black Baptist conventions are as follows: National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Inc., 5,500,000; National Baptist Convention of America, 2,668,799; Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., 521,692.

<sup>26</sup>Mays and Nicholson, pp. 278-92.

<sup>27</sup>See Woodson's chapter, "The Call of Politics," pp. 198-223.

politics.”

Because the church is authentically black, it has functioned as a haven from white institutions which either have barred blacks or else have treated them as second class citizens. Within the church was the freedom to be black and thus the church could function as an ethnic community center. The church building took the place of the theatre and the dance hall, housed numerous suppers, lectures, recitals, debates, and plays sponsored by clubs and individuals both within and without the congregation. The church has nurtured black business and has played a crucial role in education. Nearly every black college and university was founded with the aid of a religious denomination, white or black. The Baptists established Shaw University at Raleigh in 1865, Roger Williams at Nashville in 1866 and Morehouse at Atlanta in 1867. The Methodists established Morgan College at Baltimore in 1867 and Clark at Atlanta in 1870. The black Churches themselves began to establish educational institutions. The African Methodists founded Morris Brown at Atlanta in 1885, the Colored Methodists founded Lane College at Jackson, Tennessee in 1882 and Texas College at Tyler, Texas in 1894; and black Baptists founded Selma University in 1873 and William J. Simmons University at Louisville in 1879.<sup>28</sup>

Mays has observed that there are no social classes in the black church and that the “Negro church still furnishes the best opportunity for Negroes of different social strata and various cultural groups to associate together in a thoroughgoing democratic way.”<sup>29</sup> Although increased opportunity has lent more diversity to black society since Mays wrote, the organization of Baptist churches, for example, has and still does induce a democratic fellowship. This fellowship also transcends racial barriers. Whites have always been welcomed to black churches, and instead of being relegated to the gallery, they have often been given places of honor. White ministers have not been barred from black pulpits.

The black church observed by Benjamin Mays has always been the church of the poor and the downtrodden. Moreover, it has been the church of a race, a people, who have been singled out in American history to suffer a unique form of discrimination. This experience has helped to form a church far more cohesive and uniform than any white one. It has also freed the black minister, freed him to speak for the shared ideals of his people, and freed him to speak against greed, injustice, and discrimination. Dr. Mays concluded his study with a prediction chillingly accurate in light of the civil rights movement to come and the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

This fellowship and freedom inherent in the Negro Church should be conducive to spiritual growth of a unique kind. It furnishes the foundation for the Negro church and the Negro ministry to become truly Christian and prophetic in the truest sense. The Negro church has the potentialities to become possibly the greatest spiritual force in the United States. What the Negro church does and will do with these potentialities will depend in a large measure upon the leadership as expressed in the Negro pulpit.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Woodson, pp. 180-85.

<sup>29</sup>Mays and Nicholson, p. 287.

<sup>30</sup>Mays and Nicholson, pp. 291-92.

## 4.

# The Black Church: From Radicalism to Black Theology

**T**HE SOCIAL ACTIVISM which Dr. Benjamin Mays detected as inherent but latent in the Negro church, and the special role of leadership played by the ministry came to fruition some thirty years after the completion of his study. Some scholars have taken note of this transition from potentiality to actuality through a shift in terminology, abandoning the term "Negro church" for "black church."<sup>1</sup> One scholar has seen this shift as a sharp and complete break between the two churches. The Negro church, he claims, is dead, replaced by a black church which is not only more contemporary and relevant but which also represents a conscious departure from the critical norms which made the Negro church what it was.<sup>2</sup> Others have embraced the idea of a more gradual evolution, noting a strain of radicalism in black religion nearly two centuries old.<sup>3</sup> These are two different ways of viewing the same phenomenon, for while black religion has long been radical, demanding a fundamental redirection in human relations in American society, the black church today also reflects a different role for the church in the lives of contemporary black people. Perhaps the difference is best explained by the idea that the Negro church was often a symbol of freedom, while the black church has tended to function more as an instrument of freedom. This is too simply put, for the Negro church was never purely submissive nor has the black church been a steady and uniform participant in social action. The dichotomy does at least lead to the question which has occupied much of the recent discussion on the black church, and which frames this chapter: Is the black church otherworldly or this worldly?

The question can be answered through an examination of the history of black radicalism, which according to Gayraud Wilmore was always closely linked to black religion.<sup>4</sup> The connection between radicalism and religion was manifested in several different ways, one of which was literature. Two pamphlets, *The Ethiopian Manifesto* by Robert Alexander Young, and *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* by David Walker, both published in 1829, were stinging denunciations of slavery and white racism. Both were based on the religious convictions of their authors, both utilized Biblical imagery and language, and both appealed to the consciences of white religionists. What made these works radical was first of all that they were written by black men; secondly, that these black men denounced the American institution of slavery; and most of all because the authors identified publicly that racism was the root of evil in white society.

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<sup>1</sup>The distinction between "Negro church" and "black church" is a useful one. I have generally applied the more contemporary term "black church" to all phases of its development, using "Negro church" only for purposes of specific contrast.

<sup>2</sup>C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974, bound together with Frazier's volume), pp. 106-7.

<sup>3</sup>Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>Wilmore, p. xii.

One strain of black radicalism was not so peaceful. There were three major and many minor slave insurrections in the early part of the nineteenth century. The first insurrection occurred in the summer of 1800 and like all the others it was deeply influenced by the slaves' religion. Gabriel, the slave of Thomas Prosser, lived on a plantation just outside of Richmond, Virginia. A student of the Bible, Gabriel was drawn particularly to the biblical hero, Samson. Emulating him, Gabriel wore his hair long and felt certain that he was a new Samson destined to end slavery and to establish a free black nation in America. His plan was to kill all the whites he encountered, seize arms and ammunition from the Richmond arsenal, loot the state treasury, and if possible, negotiate the liberation of the remaining slaves.<sup>5</sup> Despite considerable organization, the insurrection failed when two slaves revealed the plot to their master. Furthermore, a violent storm which struck on the night of the planned attack delayed its execution, allowing time for the militia to be called out, leading to the arrest of most of the leaders of the plot. Gabriel fled but was arrested and executed.

Another major insurrection was planned by Denmark Vesey in 1822. Vesey had managed to buy his freedom in 1800. He too was drawn to a study of the Scriptures which profoundly influenced his life. One of Vesey's closest companions was a slave by the name of Gullah Jack. Jack was a native African conjurer who told his followers to keep a piece of crab claw in their mouths as protection during the attack. Through Vesey and Jack, the plot was infused with a powerful mixture of Christianity and African folk religion.

Vesey was a member of the Hampstead Church (Methodist) in Charleston, South Carolina, one of several black congregations which had recently separated from white churches. All of the leaders of the plot were members of this church, and the entire black Methodist community served as a source of dissidence and conspiracy.<sup>6</sup> In the year immediately preceding the planned insurrection, the black Methodists, particularly the Hampstead Church congregation, were continually harassed by the white Charleston Methodists. This must have served to further radicalize the blacks and to draw them into identifying ecclesiastical freedom from whites with emancipation and political liberty.

Influenced by the Biblical story of the taking of Jericho by Joshua and the Israelites, Vesey envisioned a general rising of the slaves all around Charleston.<sup>7</sup> They were to seize arms from the gunshops and arsenal as they marched toward the city. As they approached, more slaves and even some whites (just as Rehab helped the Israelites?) were to join the insurrection. Inspired by the Old Testament, all the inhabitants of the city were to be slain and the city set on fire. Once again the plot was betrayed by a slave to his master, the militia was summoned and the leaders were seized. Vesey and over thirty others were executed, scores were banished or whipped. The plot was broken.

The most famous of the antebellum slave insurrections was led by Nat Turner. He was born in Southampton County, Virginia, a slave to Benjamin Turner. The master provided his slaves with an atmosphere of evangelical piety as he conducted prayer meetings for his family, both black and white. Nat learned to read and write and became a Baptist preacher. He developed a concept of Jesus which was not the meek and mild lamb of God, the image his master surely wanted to portray, but Jesus as a prophet of God's justice to the oppressed, the protagonist of radical social change.<sup>8</sup>

A series of visions convinced Turner that he had been chosen to be the instrument of God's wrath.<sup>9</sup> Awaiting a final sign, a solar eclipse in February 1831 convinced him that the time had come. Before

<sup>5</sup>Wilmore, pp. 53-55.

<sup>6</sup>Wilmore, p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>Wilmore, pp. 58-59.

<sup>8</sup>Wilmore, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup>We know a great deal more about Nat Turner and his revolt than any other slave revolt, due in part to his recorded confession. There is a relatively large body of literature on the subject. See Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 231-35, and the ample references in Wilmore's footnotes.

midnight, Turner and six others armed with only a hatchet and a broadax, set out for the home of John Travis, at the time Turner's master. They slaughtered Travis and his entire family, seizing whatever weapons they could find. By Tuesday morning at least seventy slaves had killed fifty-seven whites in Southampton County, the bloodiest slave insurrection in American history. The rest of the story is familiar. The militia eventually dispersed the slaves, Turner fled and was able to avoid capture for the remarkably long period of two months, considering the scope of the effort to capture him. Turner confessed, was tried and hanged, along with twenty other slaves. At least another hundred slaves were killed in the fighting or were summarily hung when captured.

The reaction was terrible. Legislation was passed prohibiting slaves from learning how to read and write, forbidding blacks from preaching, and restricting black religious meetings. The connection between religion and the insurrection was clear. Governor Floyd of Virginia wrote: "From all that has come to my knowledge during and since this affair, I am fully convinced that every black preacher in the whole country east of the Blue Ridge, was in the secret."<sup>10</sup>

Each of these slave insurrections indicate that religion strongly fortified the resistance of the slaves to oppression. Furthermore, they demonstrate that there has been a radical strain in black religion for almost two hundred years. In fact history reveals that the most radical phase in black religion may have occurred in the first decades of the nineteenth century and not, as most moderns would think, in the 1960's. Finally, it must be noted that the violence of these revolts, however misguided, was directed against an equally violent slave-owning regime. In this case Nat Turner certainly was not promising "pie in the sky" to his people, he was offering them deliverance from inhuman oppression.

Black church radicalism manifested itself in ways other than literature and violent insurrection. Since the independent church movement was also a black freedom movement, there was always a deep interest in black nationalism. In fact black nationalism, Christianity, and emigration were always related in the black American experience. The idea of black emigration to Africa was first conceived in 1759 by the Reverend Samuel Hopkins, a former slaveowner in Newport, Rhode Island.<sup>11</sup> He devised a plan to educate some free blacks and to send them to Africa to help civilize and Christianize their brothers and sisters. This was the prototype of a program which in the minds of blacks always linked emigration to a missionary effort in Africa. Hopkins' effort led to the establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1816 and to the founding of Liberia in 1822.

Alexander Crummel (1819-1898), an Episcopal clergyman, was an influential spokesman for missionary emigration who spent twenty years in missionary work in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Crummel's primary concern was that the message of Jesus Christ be spread to all parts of the world. He was also motivated by black pride, self respect, and nationalism, viewing missionary emigration as the responsibility of black Christians to their fatherland.<sup>12</sup> A more radical exponent of black emigration was Marcus Garvey (1887-1940). He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914. In the tradition of black religion this society was not only concerned with religious affairs but with political, social, recreational, cultural, and economic ones as well. Part of the UNIA program was the "back to Africa" movement. Its goal was to unite all the black people of the world and to establish a country and a government which was truly blacks' own.<sup>13</sup> Garvey's program was based on a withering criticism of white society and the hopelessness of blacks ever obtaining their human rights from whites. His solution was racial separation and the independent assertion of black nationality.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted by Wilmore, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup>Wilmore, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup>Wilmore, pp. 113-114.

<sup>13</sup>Wilmore, pp. 145-149.



The influence and effect of religion on the lives of the slaves was sufficiently profound to induce one scholar to write of "the religious foundations of the black nation."<sup>14</sup> Denied their very humanity, it was religion and its institutional expression, the church, which were the sole means by which the slaves could express their blackness. Religion, therefore, epitomized the status of blacks in American society, even after emancipation. Black religion, especially in its Baptist-Methodist configuration, was both black and American. It was a product of the American experience, but it was never a part of American Christianity in the sense of being an ethnic component in a pluralistic society. By means of a white racist ideology, blacks were simultaneously a part of American society while always separated from it. Because there was a racial basis for this separation, the black experience cut across geographical and class lines. There was in effect not a black class but a black nation. Religion was the primary means of expressing this nationhood because it was through religion that the slaves had reclaimed their self worth, their humanity. Furthermore, it was religion which held them together, which prevented them from becoming the automotons their masters wanted them to be, and which left them free to love one another and the whites who oppressed them.

Although it has been secularized in the twentieth century, the political and theological foundations of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism were historically rooted in the black church.<sup>15</sup> What originated in the theological impulse of spreading the Gospel of Christ to bretheren in Africa, developed into political and cultural separatism, black pride, and a solidarity with black African nations. The close connection between the black church and politics has also been preserved. The recent candidacy of Jesse Jackson is but one example. The 1984 election saw approximately ninety percent of blacks voting for the Democratic nominee, Walter Mondale, who white voters generally rejected. This remarkable solidarity is the result of a common consciousness nurtured by a history of oppression and the bonds of a shared black faith. Moreover, recent voting patterns also indicate that blacks perceive political and social issues differently from whites. This too can be traced to the legacy of a black radicalism born out of oppression, nurtured by religion, and which found solace in a black nationhood. After the Civil War the black church was greatly preoccupied with establishing local congregations and founding denominational organizations. Perhaps the challenge of this monumental task explains the growth of two groups, after 1875, within (and without) the black church. They came to be known as radicals and conservatives, those who sought to maintain the radical heritage of the church before emancipation, and those who were determined to devote all their efforts to building an independent institutional black church.

The differences between these two groups are complex, too complex to discuss fully here.<sup>16</sup> It will suffice, first of all, to note that radicals and conservatives did not differ in purpose but rather in tactics. Certainly both groups were disgusted by white racism and both were dedicated to fostering self respect among blacks. But whether to accomplish this through protest or accomodation, through lawful or unlawful means, through separation or the integration of the races, to name just a few differences, was the subject of the debate.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most succinct way to illuminate the difference between radicals and conservatives is to contrast the greatest spokesmen of each group, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, who Kelly Miller called "natural antipodes":

Douglass was like a lion, bold and fearless; Washington is lamblike, meek and submissive. Douglass escaped from personal bondage, which his soul abhorred; but for Lincoln's proclamation, Washington would probably have arisen to esteem and favor in the eyes of his master as a good and faithful servant. Douglass insisted upon

<sup>14</sup>Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 280-84.

<sup>15</sup>Willmore, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup>See Carter Woodson's chapter, "The Conservative and Progressive," pp. 224-241.

<sup>17</sup>Kelly Miller, *Radicals and Conservatives And Other Essays on the Negro in America* (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 25-26 (first pub. 1908).

rights; Washington insists upon duty. Douglass held up to public scorn the sins of the white man; Washington portrays the faults of his own race. Douglass spoke what he thought the world should hear; Washington speaks only what he feels it is disposed to listen to. Douglass's conduct was actuated by principle; Washington's by prudence. Douglass had no limited, copyrighted programme for his race, but appealed to the Decalogue, the Golden Rule, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States; Washington, holding these principles in the shadowy background, presents a practical expedient applicable to present needs. Douglass was a moralist, insisting upon the application of righteousness to public affairs; Washington is a practical opportunist, accepting the best terms which he thinks it possible to secure.<sup>18</sup>

The actual, personal rivals of Washington of which Miller speaks was not Douglass, who died in 1895 just as Washington was tightening his grip on black leadership, but two of his heirs, William Monroe Trotter, editor of *The Guardian* and the Atlanta University Professor, W.E.B. Du Bois. Both were vociferous opponents of Washington and founders of the "Niagra Movement." Part of the differences between the two black groups can be traced to temperament, but much can also be attributed to the times in which each lived. The decades around the turn of the century were notable for the effectiveness of the white reaction in the South. Reconstruction had been finally dismantled, the Ku Klux Klan organized, Jim Crow Laws introduced, while the lynching of blacks reached unprecedented numbers. It was in this historical context that Washington's nonconfrontational, gradualistic, and self help philosophy was accepted by most black preachers.

Booker T. Washington was actually less appreciative of the black church than was W.E.B. Du Bois, criticizing what he saw as its otherworldly orientation and its failure to instill moral responsibility. He sought to instill the black church with the "Tuskegee Philosophy": "It has been said that the trouble with the Negro church is that it is too emotional. It seems to me that what the Negro church needs is a more definite connection with the social and moral life of the Negro people. Could this connection be effected in a large degree, it would give to the movement for the upbuilding of the race the force and inspiration of a religious motive. It would give to the Negro religion more of that missionary spirit, the spirit of service, that it needs to purge it of some of the worst elements that still cling to it."<sup>19</sup>

Many of the black preachers took up Washington's call for service with a vengeance. Among them, Woodson described the ministry of Dr. W.N. DeBerry, pastor of a Congregational church in Springfield, Massachusetts. The church had a well equipped modern plant:

"...a parish home for working girls and a branch church at Amherst, Massachusetts. In the main plant are maintained a free employment bureau, a women's welfare league, a night school of domestic training, a girls' and a boys' club emphasizing the handicrafts, music, and athletics. This church has solved the problem of supplying the needs of the people during the week as well as their spritual needs on Sunday, by emphasizing some life activity for everyday in the week. He now gives all his time to social work."<sup>20</sup>

It was this "Negro Church Socialized," to use Woodson's phrase, which drew the critical eye of W.E.B. Du Bois. In his famous study on the Philadelphia Negro, Du Bois concluded that the church there had become more of a social than a religious institution. He listed the function of the church in order of emphasis as: 1) The raising of the annual budget. 2) The maintenance of membership. 3)

<sup>18</sup>Miller, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup>Booker T. Washington, "The Religious Life of the Negro," *North American Review* 181 (July 1905): 21, reprinted in Hart Nelson, et al, eds. *Black Church in America*, pp. 40-43.

<sup>20</sup>Woodson, p. 253.

Social intercourse and amusements. 4) The setting of moral standard. 5) Promotion of general intelligence. 6) Efforts for social betterment.

Du Bois saw this socialized church as morally timid. Because it is democratic, the preacher does not lead the congregation but rather follows the moral standards of the flock. These standards consist of old values, condemning the grosser forms of immorality but definitely are not reformist. Du Bois concedes the sincerity of the socialized church and the decency of the black preacher but notes the failure of both, particularly the leadership of the preacher who ". . . in this city is a shrewd manager, a respectable man, a good talker, a pleasant companion, but neither learned nor spirited, nor a reformer."<sup>21</sup> This lack of reforming ardor is the source of Du Bois' most penetrating criticism.

The deradicalization of the black church by the advent of Washington's philosophy was augmented by the attenuation of the rural Southern ethos. The fact that Du Bois could compose a study on blacks in a Northern city like Philadelphia calls to mind the effects of the "Great Migration" of Southern rural blacks to the urban centers of the North. As blacks moved North they took their churches and preachers with them. Uprooted from the relative security and tranquility of the rural South, the black church faced new opportunities and challenges in a secularized urban environment. Du Bois was one of the first to perceive this phenomenon and to describe the break up of the homogenous black church into a Northern branch which tended towards radicalism and a Southern one which he said leaned towards hypocritical compromise.<sup>22</sup>

While the "Negro Church Socialized" operated generally under the influence of Washington, black radicalism was becoming increasingly dechristianized, and split into three principal streams. One was self-consciously Christian, another was influenced by a belligerent and thoroughly secularized racism, and a third was ideologically mixed and dominated by intellectuals and the middle class.<sup>23</sup>

The first stream attempted to maintain the Christian radicalism of Bishop Henry Turner, which resurfaced in the quasi-religious black nationalism of Marcus Garvey. It also flourished in the various Christian sects which began to spring up in the ghetto. Despite the impressive growth of some of the mainline black churches such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, it is quite clear that many blacks were dissatisfied and were seeking solace elsewhere. The proliferation of sects and cults in the Northern cities illustrated a need among those new black immigrants which E. Franklin Frazier has explained through sociological analysis. For example, faith healing is appealing "because it combines elements similar to the folk beliefs of the southern Negro with an "intellectual" element acquired through the reflection which is forced upon the Negro in the city." Holiness churches are attractive because they are able "to resolve the moral conflicts created by the conflict between the simple mores of the South and free and easy ways of the city."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Frazier saw storefront churches as a rejection of the large urban church and an attempt to recapture the intimacy of the small church left back home in the rural South.<sup>25</sup> In a sense then, many of these movements contained political, social, economic as well as religious concerns which focused specifically on the priority of blackness, the redemption from oppression, and the development of secular power.<sup>26</sup>

The 1920's and 30's brought forth a number of black sects and cults of amazing diversity. Bishop Ida Robinson founded the Mt. Sinai Holy Church of America, Inc. in Philadelphia which featured

<sup>21</sup>W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia: Published for the University of Pennsylvania, 1899), pp. 201-207.

<sup>22</sup>DuBois, "Of the Faith of Our Fathers," p. 37.

<sup>23</sup>Wilmore, p. 170.

<sup>24</sup>E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*. (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 357 (first pub. 1949).

<sup>25</sup>Frazier, *Negro Church*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>26</sup>Joseph R. Washington, Jr. *Black Sects and Cults* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 13-16.

faith healing, foot washing, and extensive female participation.<sup>27</sup> Bishop Charles Emmanuel "Daddy" Grace established a following of national proportions under the organizational title of the United House of Prayer. Grace combined an acute business acumen, which included the sale of Daddy Grace toothpaste, tea, coffee, and soap which earned him wealth estimated in the millions, with an emotional form of worship. Worshippers would engage in ecstatic dancing urged on by a piano and drum until they reached a physical frenzy with a prominent sex motive, shouting out, "Daddy you feel so good." Among his followers, Grace achieved almost divine status.<sup>28</sup> Quite different was the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement founded by Major J. Divine. Predominantly black, this sect also had white membership and did not tolerate any form of racial discrimination. Father Divine himself took a young white woman for his wife. A sexual taboo forbade husband and wife from living together. Dancing with the opposite sex was also forbidden and all intoxicants were strictly prohibited.<sup>29</sup>

The second stream of early twentieth-century black radicalism was distinguished by black racism and hatred of whites. Thoroughly secular, it tended to reject religious influences completely. Many of the people in this stream, however, eventually ended up as members of Islamic sects.

One of the first of these Islamic sects was The Moorish Science Temples, founded around 1913 by Timothy Drew, also known as Noble Drew Ali.<sup>30</sup> The Church of God, or the Black Jews, founded by Prophet F.S. Cherry, was less virilently anti-white but like the Moorish Science Temples it represented an attempt to redefine black nationality and signaled a radical departure from traditional black (Christian) religion.<sup>31</sup> The most influential of these sects has been the Nation of Islam popularly known as the Black Muslim movement. Founded by the mysterious Master Wali Fard Muhammad in Detroit in the early thirties, the movement was guided by his disciple Elijah Muhammed for more than forty years. He developed a home grown version of the Islamic faith which has captured the attention of many blacks from Malcolm X to the boxer Muhammed Ali. The Nation of Islam represents the most serious rejection of traditional black religion in American history. Identifying Christianity as the white man's religion, they have redefined black nationality. Under Elijah Muhammed they embraced capitalism, while radical but still Christian blacks have condemned it as one of the principal means of white economic oppression. Similarly, they rejected the idea of racial integration, long a tenet of the black Christian church, for a policy of racial separatism. The problems of white man's culture: alcohol, drugs, sexual deviation, family disorganization, and juvenile delinquency were also spurned for a rigid Islamic puritanism. The Black Muslims are constituted by former black Christians who have become exasperated by a white society which they see as inevitably and irretrievably unjust and who have rejected a black church which they perceive as having contributed to the loss of freedom for blacks because of its acceptance of Christian principles.

The third stream was also secular, though respectful of the traditional black church and influenced by its moderation. One of the most influential organizations formed out of this stream of radicalism was actually not very radical at all. The National Urban League, founded in 1911 out of two earlier organizations, was primarily concerned with the social welfare of blacks. This concern to serve the social needs of blacks and the interracial character of their program reflected the traditional concerns of the black church. Not so traditional and reflecting the effects of the "Great Migration", was the fact that the National Urban League was established in New York City and that it became the principal

<sup>27</sup>Wilmore, p. 156.

<sup>28</sup>Frazier, *Negro Church*, p. 66.

<sup>29</sup>Frazier, *Negro Church*, pp. 62-65 and Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects in America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1949), rev. ed. pp. 124-27.

<sup>30</sup>Wilmore, pp. 159-60.

<sup>31</sup>Frazier, *Negro Church*, pp. 67-68.

agency for dealing with the mass migration of blacks to Northern cities.<sup>82</sup>

Another organization grew out of the opposition to Booker T. Washington led by Trotter and Du Bois. A meeting of black leaders, called by Du Bois at Niagara Falls in 1905, gave rise to the Niagara Movement. A second meeting in 1906 at the site of John Brown's raid, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, produced a resolution encapsulating the movement's program. This consisted of the guarantee of civil rights, the end of segregation, the enfranchisement of blacks, the abolition of lynching and the encouragement of education.<sup>83</sup> Although the language was assertive these do not seem to us today to constitute radical demands. This was not so to contemporaries. Kelly Miller, a moderate black leader and Chairman of the sociology department at Howard University, called the Harpers Ferry manifesto "scarcely distinguishable from a wild and frantic shriek" and a "lachrymal wail."<sup>84</sup>

In 1909 a conference was held in New York City, attended by W.E.B. Du Bois and many of his associates in the Niagara Movement, which led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The program of the NAACP was basically the same as Du Bois' group, and Du Bois himself was elected Director of Publicity and editor of the organization's publication, *The Crisis*. The publication proved immensely popular catapulting Du Bois into a national leadership role left vacant by the death of Washington in 1915. The NAACP itself grew rapidly. In 1913 it had only fourteen branches, only one in the South; but by 1916, it had sixty-seven with six in the South. By 1919 there were 300 branches, there were 122 branches in the North with 38,420 members; 155 in the South with 42,588 members; and 33 in the West with 7,440 members.<sup>85</sup> Although it quickly became a national organization, these figures do indicate that in origin the NAACP was a product of the Northern cities.

Although the NAACP was a secular organization founded in the Northern urban areas and an agency of protest and legal action directed by the black intelligentsia and middle class, with significant white support, it was not inimical to the black church. On the contrary, the NAACP often met in churches, opened and closed their meetings with a prayer and gave special deference to the clergy. In the 1920's Carter Woodson wrote that the "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People would be unable to carry out its program without the aid of the Negro Church."<sup>86</sup> If the NAACP was a secular agency which enjoyed a special intimacy with the church, then the black church itself was beginning to embrace a series of this worldly causes. The social welfare ministry of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. was soon to become the political activist ministry of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

By the time of the First World War, blacks were moving out of the rural South and into the Northern cities, taking their church with them, but also diluting the rural Southern ethos which had characterized the black church from its inception. New secular organizations sprang up to do some of the work which traditionally had been part of the church's mission. New sects and independent churches outside the traditional denominations developed, particularly in the North, while the first cracks in the black church's Christianity appeared. From the end of the First World War to the middle of the century there was a growing trend of disillusionment with the black church, its relevance to the black experience being questioned widely for the first time.

<sup>82</sup>Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, pp. 526-27.

<sup>83</sup>Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, pp. 523-24.

<sup>84</sup>*Radicals and Conservatives*, p. 30.

<sup>85</sup>Figures quoted in Wendell H. Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter, eds., *A History of the South* (n.p.: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), vol. 10 *The Emergence of the New South* by George B. Tindall, p. 159; and Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, p. 526.

<sup>86</sup>Woodson, p. 280.

The man who reversed this trend, who instilled a new vitality and reverence for the church was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was the perfect man for the job, embodying both the traditionalism and radicalism of the black church. A product of both a long line of Georgia Baptist preachers and a Ph.D. degree from Boston University, King could combine the cadences of the black Baptist style with the nonviolent theory of resistance of Mohandas K. Ghandi. He could lead a bus boycott while preaching a message of the redemptive power of Christian love triumphing over suffering and death. Most of all King was able to combine the solace traditionally provided by the church, as the sanctuary from an unjust society, with something more: an opportunity for blacks to actually alter their own lives. It was a powerful combination.

Martin Luther King's relationship with the organized church was two-sided. He was the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama and seemingly on the verge of a very promising career which could lead to a pampered middle class pastorate. He was also the founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and earned the enmity of Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, President of the National Baptist Convention, Inc., who was convinced that King was a major mover in the schism and formation of the Progressive Baptist Convention. King was in fact a loyal churchman who was denied the support of the major denominations who perceived him as too radical. He was forced to reach beyond the traditional church, to blacks and whites, in order to accomplish his quest for racial justice. Ironically, as events and ideas moved quickly in the 1960's, by the last years of his life King was no longer perceived by many blacks as too radical but rather not radical enough. It was Malcolm X who persuaded much of the black leadership that a more radical approach needed to be pursued.

Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, the son of a Baptist preacher, was by adolescence well on his way to a life of criminality. At age twenty-one he was convicted of burglary and sentenced to ten years in the Massachusetts State Prison at Charlestown. It was in prison that Malcolm began to correspond with Elijah Muhammed and demonstrated a growing interest in the Black Muslim movement. The essence of Malcolm's message was a rejection of Christianity:

My brothers and sisters, our white slavemaster's Christian religion taught us black people here in the wilderness of North America that we will sprout wings when we die and fly up into the sky where God will have for us a special place called heaven. This is white man's Christian religion used to brainwash us black people! We have accepted it. We have believed it. We have practiced it! And while we were doing all of that, for himself, this blue-eyed devil has twisted his Christianity, to keep his foot on our backs. . .to keep our eyes fixed on the pie in the sky and heaven in the hereafter. . .while he enjoys his heaven right here . . .on this earth. . .in this life.<sup>37</sup>

This was not so much a rejection of the principles of Christianity as of the twisted version which had been used by the white man to oppress blacks. In this sense Malcolm remained within the mainstream of black religion in identifying white religion as racist, but he took his criticism one step further by declaring Christianity to be irrelevant to the needs of black people.

Both Malcolm and King were heirs to the radical black religious tradition. Malcolm was radical when he asked blacks to reject the slave religion of Christianity, which was, however, blacks' own tradition as well, and embrace the worship of Allah. King was perhaps even more radical when in the light of American history, he proposed to make whites become truly Christian, to make Christian love

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<sup>37</sup>Quoted from Malcom's *Autobiography* by Wilmore, p. 184.

the operative agent of reconciliation between black and white, rich and poor, segregationist and integrationist.

This increase in black religious radicalism came at a time, the 1960's, of increased radicalism generally in American society. Student demonstrations, anti-Vietnam War marches, ghetto riots, acts of terrorism, were all becoming part of the American social fabric. Black power was one of the new slogans heard at this time. Black Power? Perhaps we have strayed too far from the examination of black religion?

The radicalization, or better perhaps, the re-radicalization of the black church initiated by King (and others) began to grow more radical and fell increasingly out of the hands of the clergy. People like the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began speaking about the non-Christian term "black power." King was dismayed by the use of the term, but the truth was that the black-white liberal coalition he had put together was coming apart under the stress of the riots which were devastating Northern cities each summer. In July 1966 a group of radical Northern black church leaders met in New York City and formed the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC) [later the National Conference of Black Churchmen, (NCBC)]. Together they decided to issue a statement on the concept of black power, which thrust the church squarely into the midst of the controversy. One of those founding members has described the statement, which was published in the *New York Times* on July 31, 1966, as "a carefully worded statement of black power that would clear the air, clarify the position of Northern church leadership, and point to some theological implications of the concept of power."<sup>88</sup> The section directed towards white churchmen was drawn from the historical experience of the black church and, but for the differences of modern language, could have been written by Bishop Richard Allen:

As black men who were long ago forced out of the white church to create and to wield "black power," we fail to understand the emotional quality of the outcry of some clergy against the use of the term today. It is not enough to answer that "integration" is the solution. For it is precisely the nature of the operation of power under some forms of integration which is being challenged. The Negro Church was created as a result of the refusal to submit to the indignities of a false kind of "integration" in which all power was in the hands of white people. A more equal sharing of power is precisely what is required as the precondition of authentic human interaction. We understand the growing demand of Negro and white youth for a more honest kind of integration; one which increases rather than decreases the capacity of the disinherited to participate with power in all of the structures of our common life. Without this capacity to participate with power—i.e., to have some organized political and economic strength to really influence people with whom one interacts—integration is not meaningful. For the issue is not one of racial balance but of honest interracial interaction.

For this kind of interaction to take place, all people need power, whether black or white. We regard as sheer hypocrisy or as a blind and dangerous illusion the view that opposes love to power. Love should be a controlling element in power, but what love opposes is precisely the misuse and abuse of power, not power itself. So long as white churchmen continue to moralize and misinterpret Christian love, so long will justice continue to be subverted in this land.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup>Wilmore, p. 196.

<sup>89</sup>Reproduced by C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier*, p. 172.

Black theology is the culmination of the civil rights and black power movements in the black church. Over the past decade and a half scores of books and articles have been written on black theology. What follows is merely an introduction to some of the ideas put forward by some writers on the subject. While a general consensus has emerged on what black theology is and its relevance to black religion, there is much disagreement on the particulars and on just how far to push the idea of theological blackness. Any attempt to reconcile these diverse views or even to describe them is beyond the scope of this study. The present task is to expose some of the ideas of black theology and to note its role in black religion.

Black theology originated in three contexts. The first was the civil rights movement which was strongly influenced by the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. King, who associated the black church with the struggle for racial justice, inspired others to develop a theology based less on seminary or university study than on the historical black experience in a white racist society. Secondly, in 1964, Joseph Washington's book *Black Religion* was published. The book was a rather negative evaluation of black religion which he depicted as folk religion, cut off by whites from genuine Christianity. The black church was a "religious society" without a theology.<sup>40</sup> Many blacks denied Washington's thesis and black theology was created in part to refute Washington's book. The rise of the black power movement, which rejected integration as blacks' ultimate goal, was the third context in which black theology developed. The "Black Power Statement" issued by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen separated the gospel of Jesus from white Christianity and identified it with the struggle of poor blacks for justice. In response to this black power statement some of the black clergy decided that it was time to make their own interpretation of the gospel. It was in these contexts that the term "black theology" emerged.

According to James Cone the earliest reference to the term "black theology" occurred in *Time* magazine on November 15, 1968.<sup>41</sup> Over the next few months several other articles, most of which were printed in reference to the convocation of the NCBC and its published reports, also made use of the term. The first attempt at a systematic construction of black theology was Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (published in April 1969) which also emerged out of the debate of the NCBC and especially out of Gayraud Wilmore's Theological Commission Project Report.

The NCBC was an organization of Northern black clergy dominated by members of mostly white denominations. Perhaps it was this minority status which motivated these clerics to develop a theology which was less concerned with emphasizing the universality of the Christian faith and more interested in examining the particularity of the black religious experience and the special needs of an impoverished and deprived black minority.

Edward Braxton, a black Catholic priest, has noted that theology can be defined in several different ways. His construction is useful both in highlighting the difference in the universalist and particularist approaches, and as an introduction to the discussion of a definition of black theology which will soon follow.

Braxton identifies three types of theology. Foundational theology he defines as "...technical philosophical reflection on the foundational questions of religion in the context of a university. By employing the methods of the academy it seeks to describe the fundamental intelligibility of theological discourse."<sup>42</sup> "Theology may also be technical philosophical reflection on the central

<sup>40</sup>James Cone, *For My People, Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), pp. 8-9.

<sup>41</sup>Cone, *For My People*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup>These definitions of theology can be found in Edward K. Braxton, "Toward a Black Catholic Theology," *Freeing the Spirit*, 5, no. 2 (1977), pp. 3-6 and reprinted in G.S. Wilmore and J.H. Cone, eds., *Black Theology, A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), pp. 325-28.



themes, symbols, values of a particular church tradition in a church context. This brand of theology seeks to integrate, reinterpret and pass on the tradition that constitutes the self-concept of a religious group such as Roman Catholicism." This may be termed systematic theology. There is a third possibility: "Theology may be a reflection on the concrete experiential world and the wide-spread experience of oppression of various individuals and groups. In this context theology looks to the symbols of freedom and liberation that are a part of its tradition because they may provide the necessary catalysts for transforming the concrete social order. This may be called practical or pastoral theology." Braxton also notes that fundamental theology seeks to establish "a public language for discoursing about ultimate reality." This type of theology seeks to separate itself from particulars such as race, sex, ethnicity, credal tradition, education, economic, and social situations. As you move into systematic and especially practical or pastoral theology, these particulars play a more important role. Black theology very definitely fits into the last category of practical or pastoral theology. It seeks not to discourse about ultimate reality but about a particular - the black experience in North America.

In attempting to define black theology several difficulties need to be addressed. Black theology is a relatively new field of inquiry which is still developing and which has changed over the past decade and a half. Secondly, individual scholars, while agreeing in part, have placed different emphasis on various aspects of black theology. Finally, many black leaders have rejected the very bases of a black theology.

A parenthetical definition offered by James Cone is a good starting point. He defines black theology as "an interpretation of the faith in the light of black history and culture and completely separate from white religion."<sup>43</sup> As noted, this definition identifies theology with the particular experience of American blacks. Gayraud Wilmore observes that black theology, though Christian ". . . is a different way of responding to a singular [i.e. particular], historical experience of oppression and trying to reflect upon that experience theologically."<sup>44</sup> Cone recognizes that the break with universalism is a necessary step. "Black theology seeks to create a theological norm which is in harmony with the black condition and the biblical revelation. . . . theology cannot be indifferent to the importance of blackness to an undefined universalism."<sup>45</sup> Harmonizing theology with the black condition necessitated ". . . an interpretation of historic black faith grounded with the experience of suffering and struggle, but also in a realistic appraisal of the depth of white racism and the possibilities of black consciousness and power."<sup>46</sup> It is the attack on white religion and the prominence of liberation theology which forms the core of black theology.

The attack on white religion was rooted in the black power movement. Black theologians were quick to pick up the term "black power" and to incorporate it into their vocabulary. James Cone in his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, explicitly identified Christianity with black power:

If we can believe the New Testament witness which proclaims Jesus as resurrected and thus active even now, then he must be alive in those very people who are struggling in the midst of misery and humiliation. If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined to the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice. If he is not in the ghetto, if he is not where [human beings] are living at the brink of existence, but is, rather, in the easy life of the suburbs, then the gospel is a lie. The opposite, however, is the case. Christianity is not alien to black

<sup>43</sup>Cone, *For My People*, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup>Wilmore, p. 218.

<sup>45</sup>James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Lippincott, 1970), p. 76.

<sup>46</sup>Wilmore, p. 211.

power; it is black power.<sup>47</sup>

For Cone and for most black theologians the connection between theology and black power rested on the assertion that the gospel and resurrection of Jesus was more relevant to poor people, especially blacks, than to the white middle class. Albert Cleage, however, made a literal connection between Jesus, the gospel, and black power:

When I say Jesus was black, that Jesus was the black Messiah, I'm not saying "Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus was black?" or "Let's pretend that Jesus was black," or "It's necessary psychologically for us to believe that Jesus was black." I'm saying that Jesus WAS black. There never was a white Jesus. Now if you're white, you can accept him if you want to, and you can through psychological gymnastics and pretend that he was white, but he was black. If you're such a white racist that you've got to believe that he was white, then you're going to distort history to preserve his whiteness."<sup>48</sup>

While most have been unpersuaded by Cleage's literalism, his insistence that blacks must be freed from a white Christ has become a basic tenet of black theology.

Until black Christians are ready to challenge this lie [a white Christ], they have not freed themselves from their spiritual bondage to the white man, nor established in their minds their right to first-class citizenship in Christ's kingdom on earth. Black people cannot build dignity on their knees worshipping a white Christ. We must put down this white Jesus which the white man gave us in slavery and which has been tearing us to pieces.<sup>49</sup>

The attack on white religion extended to the institutional church. The *Black Manifesto*, written by James Foreman in 1969 and addressed "To the White Christian Churches and the Synagogues in the United States of American and to All Other Racist Institutions," demanded reparations totaling \$500,000,000. Almost immediately the Board of Directors of the NCBC endorsed the Black Manifesto and offered to negotiate and coordinate the reparation money paid by the white churches.<sup>50</sup>

The Catholic Church was not immune to the criticism of black radicals. In 1968 the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus issued a statement decrying racism in the Church and urging a fundamental reevaluation of the role of the Church in the black community.

The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely a part of that society. On the contrary, we feel that her primary, though not exclusive work, should be in the area of institutional, attitudinal and societal change. Within the ghetto, the role of the Church is no longer that of spokesman and leader. Apart from a more direct spiritual role, the Church's part must now be that of supporter and learner. This is a role that white priests in the black community have not been accustomed to playing and are not psychologically prepared to play.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969), p. 38.

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Alex Poinsett, "The Quest for a Black Christ," *Ebony* March 1969, p. 174 and cited in Cone, *For My People*, p. 36.

<sup>49</sup>Poinsett, p. 179, cited by Cone, *For My People*, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup>Both the *Black Manifesto* and the response of the NCBC have been reprinted in Wilmore and Cone, pp. 80-89 and pp. 90-92, respectively.

<sup>51</sup>This document was first printed in *Freeing the Spirit*, Summer 1972 and reprinted in Wilmore and Cone, pp. 322-24.

From its inception, black theology has identified itself as a theology of liberation. The 1969 statement of the Committee on Theological Prospectus, NCBC, which is the basic explication of black theology, put it this way:

Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipated black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says No to the encroachment of white oppression.<sup>52</sup>

The first source of the theme of liberation in black theology, therefore, is black power, with its emphasis on blackness and the black church. Another source, equally important, is black history. Again the NCBC statement: "Black theology is the product of black Christian experience and reflection. It comes out of the past. It is strong in the present. And we believe it is redemptive for the future."<sup>53</sup> Black theology therefore, is rooted in the black historical experience which is separate from that of whites. This is an idea developed by C. Eric Lincoln:

Black theology began with the first sermon preached by a black slave to his brothers and sisters huddled together in some plantation swamp or forest. It was not a systematic theology which "hung together in rational patterns of thought," but it was even then a theology of liberation because it questioned the established contentions that God willed the desecration of the human spirit by reducing a man to a thing.<sup>54</sup>

Black theology as cultural theology persuaded Gayraud Wilmore to use history as a tool to discover a historically different black religion which in his opinion embodied the radicalism of Richard Allen, James Varick, Andrew Bryan, David Walker and Nat Turner.

Of course the theme of liberation is also rooted in the Bible. "The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom IS the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator! 'He...hath sent me to preach deliverance to the captives' (Luke 4:18)."<sup>55</sup> In Biblical times God intervened on behalf of the oppressed. He delivered the slaves from Egypt and He sent his son, Jesus, who was crucified by the rich and powerful of first-century Palestine, to redeem us. "Jesus is black" became the best way of saying that God was on the side of oppressed blacks in the present as well.<sup>56</sup> Finally, Black theologians also drew on European theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann, and third world theologians, especially Latin Americans, in their development of the theme of liberation.<sup>57</sup>

It would be inappropriate in the context of this booklet to attempt a survey of the ideas of each and every black theologian. I have, to a certain extent, accepted the views of James H. Cone as normative

<sup>52</sup>Wilmore and Cone, p. 101.

<sup>53</sup>Wilmore and Cone, p. 100.

<sup>54</sup>Lincoln, p. 147.

<sup>55</sup>NCBC Statement, Wilmore and Cone, p. 101.

<sup>56</sup>Cone, *For My People*, p. 67.

<sup>57</sup>On the influence of Moltmann on black theology see G. Clarke Chapman, Jr., "Black Theology and Theology of Hope: What Have They to Say to Each Other?" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 29 (1974) and reprinted in Wilmore and Cone, pp. 193-219. On the relationship between black and Latin American theologians see Wilmore and Cone, pp. 450-55.

because he was the first to set the tone and to describe the context of black theology. He is probably the most systematic writer on the subject, and he has undoubtedly authored the largest corpus. Cone has led the attack on white religion, rejecting "white theology" as irrelevant to blacks and has developed fully the theme of liberation. I have also mentioned Albert Cleage who has the distinction of being even more radical than Cone. Major Jones has adapted the ethics and theology of Martin Luther King to black theology, emphasizing the role of Christian love in reconciling blacks and whites.

J. Deotis Roberts occupies a middle ground between radicals and conservatives. He identifies himself as a black theologian and also as a Christian theologian who rejects what he calls "Black Power religion."<sup>88</sup> Basically, Roberts holds that black theology consists of two main poles, liberation and reconciliation. He accepts fully that Jesus Christ is the liberator, that the Bible, especially the exodus, reveals the power of God to deliver the downtrodden from the oppressor. He also accepts that liberation is revolutionary since it points blacks not to what is but to what ought to be. Roberts, however, tempers liberation by calling for revolution with reconciliation. He does not admit the irrelevance of whites to black theology as many of his colleagues do, and he decries the growing racial polarization in this country. He rejects black separation, maintaining his belief in a goal of creating a pluralistic and multiracial society. Through liberation and reconciliation he seeks ". . . a Christian theological approach to race relations that will lead us beyond a hypocritical tokenism to liberation as a genuine reconciliation between equals."<sup>89</sup>

Black theology has not been accepted wholesale by either the black or the white church. Even James Cone, who is by no means impartial or detached, has acknowledged certain strengths and weaknesses in the development of black theology. Among the strengths, the foremost in Cone's view is the establishment of a relationship between the Christian faith and the black freedom struggle in American society.<sup>90</sup> Other strengths include the attack on racism, the conviction that a church cannot be Christian and racist at the same time; the accent on black history and African heritage; the challenge to conservative black churches to accept the black struggle for freedom; and the accent on black ecumenism. A negative overreaction to white racism initiates Cone's list of the weaknesses of nascent black theology. Consequently, it seemed as if black theology was created out of a negative reaction to whites rather than out of a positive reaction to the historical culture of blacks. Cone also detects a serious lack of sexual, social and economic analysis. Therefore, more recently, black theology has gone off in some new directions, for example linking sexism with racism. Also black theologians have relied too much on moral persuasion and the consciences of whites. Typically intergrationist up to the time of Martin Luther King, Jr., blacks based their tactics on the assumption that Christian love and the American Dream were sufficiently powerful to draw whites away from racism. Instead, Cone feels that black theologians must rely on the tools of social analysis and the development of organizations and institutions in order to challenge what he sees as the links between racism, capitalism, and imperialism on one hand, and theology and the church on the other. Similarly, Cone has adopted Marxism as a tool (though not as an ideology) for analyzing the institutions of racism.

Others outside the circle of black theologians are not sanguine about the movement. Paul Holmer has developed an intellectual critique of black theology derived from the assertion of Immanuel Kant that an action is moral only if acted out of moral motives. In other words being attracted to an action by the pleasure it would bring would make your action non-moral. He applies this precept to black theology in the following way:

<sup>88</sup>J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 21.

<sup>89</sup>Roberts, p. 28.

<sup>90</sup>For Cone's views of these strengths and weaknesses see his *For My People*, pp. 78-98.



The point is, simply, that the Christian faith is such that believing it and practising it must depend upon doing these for intrinsically Christian reasons. If one does Christian things, even hymn-singing, preaching and theology, in order to raise black consciousness and to foment social change, one is no longer doing them for the glory of God. This way of thinking finally leads one to the recognition that religious practises and beliefs are finally a matter of indifference. If other things will get one those same ends, then one might as well evaporate the religious stream right now. For if the reason for religious living is in something non-religious, then it follows that the religious allegiance, enthusiasm and distinctive Black religious experience is, in a devastating sense, a matter of indifference.<sup>61</sup>

This is withering criticism since it attacks the very definition and *raison d'être* of black theology, namely the connection between Christianity and the black experience in the United States.

Some blacks have rejected black theology. In 1971 Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, President of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., issued a statement entitled "The Basic Theological Position of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.," which was read into the record of the annual convention.<sup>62</sup> The statement, which utilizes what may be called the "universalist-integrationist argument," consists of two parts. The first reiterates some of the basic tenets of evangelical Protestantism: that God is a spirit, that Jesus revealed God as spirit, that we accept Jesus Christ as our personal savior through the revelation of the New Testament, and that all sinners are invited into God's eternal kingdom. Two subsequent sections explain the need for the universality of the gospel and the universality of God's plan of redemption. Part One concludes with a statement rejecting any theologian who limits the redemptive effort of Jesus to any race or other group in society. In the second part, Cone's book *A Black Theology of Liberation* is specifically discussed. Although acknowledged as a "brilliant theological work" some weaknesses are refuted. The first of these is the too narrow conclusion of the author who fails to appreciate the universality of the Christian gospel of liberation. Cone's thesis is black-centered rather than Christ-centered. Dr. Jackson concludes that Cone's book can easily be interpreted as a gospel of hate of blacks against whites which could undermine the achievements of the civil rights movement and polarize blacks and whites in the United States.

John Mbiti, the noted African theologian and author of books on African religion and philosophy, stunned many of his American colleagues with a piercing criticism of black theology. Many of his arguments echo those of Dr. Jackson and need not be repeated here, but his analysis of the origin of black theology is perceptive and telling. He writes:

The subsequent history [after the arrival of the first slaves in the seventeenth century] of Americans of African origin - of exploitation, segregation, and general injustice - is the raw material of what we now call Black Theology. Insofar as Black Theology is a response to this history of humiliation and oppression it is a severe judgement and an embarrassment to Christianity, especially in America. Black theology was born from pain and communicates pain and sorrow to those who study it. It is a cry of protest against conditions that have persisted for nearly four hundred years in a land which otherwise takes pride in being free and Christian, or at least in having Christian institutions. . . One would hope that theology arises out of spontaneous joy in being a Christian, responding to life and ideas as one redeemed. Black

<sup>61</sup>Paul Holmer, "About Black Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 28 (1976): 231-39, reprinted in Wilmore and Cone, pp. 183-192.

<sup>62</sup>Printed in Wilmore and Cone, pp. 257-261.

Theology, however, is full of sorrow, bitterness, anger and hatred.<sup>63</sup>

Mbiti, therefore, sees considerable differences between black theology and African theology. The latter he sees growing out of joy in the experience of Christian faith, while black theology emerges out of the pains of oppression. The contention of Mbiti that black theology is more American than African is perhaps proven, ironically, by another African, Bishop Desmond M. Tutu of South Africa. In an article which consciously responded to Mbiti, Tutu sees a close relationship between black and African theology.<sup>64</sup> But unwittingly Tutu tends to prove Mbiti's point since as a South African he writes out of the same experience of racial discrimination as American blacks. The lesson here may be that black theology, which emphasizes above all blackness, is not African or even black in inspiration but rather is ultimately white-inspired since it is primarily a call for justice in a world of white oppression.

Finally, one further observation about black theology has been articulated by Emmanuel L. McCall who writes:

Liberation theologians are speaking mostly to each other and their academic constituents. The "rank and file" of black Americans remains untouched by their communication. It is incorrect to assume that black liberation theologians represent the thinking attitudes of the "rank and file." Substantive relationships between those who are "on the firing line" in both Africa and America must develop with those in academia.<sup>65</sup>

Are black theologians isolated from the rank and file? Certainly they would deny it. Gayraud Wilmore's book *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, for example, was above all an attempt to show through history that the kind of black radicalism embodied in black theology came out of the natural radicalism of black religion. He has a point. But black theologians like most theologians are academics who tend to speak mostly to other academics. The people in the pew, even most pastors, have had a different agenda from theologians; there has been inadequate dialogue between the two groups. It would be unwise, however, to assume that because of this separation black theologians have not articulated concerns which are important to the traditional black church and to all black people in the United States.

The question posed at the beginning of this chapter was, is the black church otherworldly or this worldly? Hopefully, the reader has been convinced by the bulk of information in this chapter that from the time of slavery to the development of the idea of black theology, the black church, and black religion generally, has always been involved in the world, although its options have always been limited by white society. If statistics are more convincing, then H.M. Nelsen and A.K. Nelsen have summarized some interesting figures.<sup>66</sup> Based on the Gallup surveys, (1957 and 1968) when asked if the Church should speak out on social and political issues, the white and nonwhite respondents answered in the following way. Whites with the least education (8th grade or less) were the least likely to respond positively (45.4 adjusted percentage). Whites with the most education (some college or more) were the most likely to answer positively (51.5 percent). Among nonwhites it was precisely the

<sup>63</sup>John Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology," *Worldview* 17 (1974): 41-44, reprinted in Wilmore and Cone, pp. 477-482.

<sup>64</sup>Desmond M. Tutu, "Black Theology / African Theology - Soul Mates or Antagonists?," *Journal of Religious Thought* 32 (1975): 25-33, reprinted in Wilmore and Cone, pp. 483-91.

<sup>65</sup>Emmanuel L. McCall, Review of *Farewell to Innocence*, by Allan Aubrey Boesak, in *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2 (1978): p. 110.

<sup>66</sup>Hart M. Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelson, *Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), pp. 90-91.

opposite, the least educated most favored the Church speaking out (79.6 percent), and the most educated were the least favorable to Church activism (47.6 percent). The time of study indicates a similar inverse pattern. In March 1957, 50.2 percent of all whites supported the Church speaking out, by February 1968 the percentage was down to 42.3. Again the opposite was true among nonwhites, 63.3 percent responding positively in 1957, rising to 75.6 percent in 1968. These figures suggest several conclusions. Most striking of all is the divergence in percentage and in the trend towards change over time between whites and nonwhites. By 1968 the positive response of nonwhites exceeded that of whites by more than 30 percent. Secondly, nonwhites who were least educated, and presumably the least assimilated into white culture, were the most favorably disposed to an activist Church. Clearly nonwhites have a different perspective on the role of the Church than do whites, and support the idea of a Church active in this world.

Figures can dramatize facts but they cannot explain them, and the reality is complex. Authors have attempted to illustrate this complexity in different ways. Some have developed sociological models to explain the religion-society relationship contained in the black church.<sup>67</sup> The first, the assimilation-isolation model, approaches the black church from two contradictory vantage points. The assimilationist viewpoint, expressed by E. Franklin Frazier, saw the church as authoritarian and anti-intellectual. Focusing on the black bourgeoisie, he saw the absolute necessity for the demise of the black church. Since integration was the ultimate goal and since Frazier correctly understood the special role of the church as a black institution, the black church had to be destroyed. On the other hand the isolation model focuses on the lower classes within the black community. Concentrating on the isolation of blacks from civic affairs, black religion is perceived as otherworldly, an opiate for a people cut off from society's mainstream.

The compensatory model lies, in effect, midway between the other two. It holds that the church has fulfilled the function of organizing large numbers of people into a group where they could compete for prestige, be elected to office, and exercise power and control. Gunnar Myrdal is frequently associated with this model. He has seen the black community as pathological and the development of black culture as a reaction to discrimination and racism. In other words, for example, the black church developed as such due to the discrimination inflicted on blacks in white churches. At the same time black churches emulated white ones and were sometimes controlled by them. The black church was not independent of white culture but was rather a distortion of it because of racism. Myrdal, therefore, has an intermediate view of the black church seeing it as a democratic institution and community center (and therefore he is less hostile to it than Frazier), but he does not recognize the church as prophetic as does the third model.

This last model has no specific name but ". . . emphasizes the importance of the black church as a base for building a sense of ethnic identity and a community of interest among its members. In addition this model often accentuates the potential of the black church or minister as a prophet to a corrupt white Christian nation."<sup>68</sup> The study by Mays and Nicholson would fall under this model. Those authors have spoken of the "genius" and "soul" of the black church which far outweigh the weaknesses of the institution. For them the church was the only place where blacks could relax, be themselves, develop their pride, and control a measure of their own lives. Furthermore, the church helped black people to survive in a hostile society and provided a base to fight for racial justice. As such the black church could function as a prophet denouncing the racism of the white church and white society. This is the function envisioned by most black theologians.

There are elements of truth in each of these three models. In my opinion, however, the first is the

<sup>67</sup>These models are explained in Nelsen and Nelsen, pp. 8-13.

<sup>68</sup>Nelsen and Nelsen, p. 11.

least valid and has become increasingly less so. Middle and upper class blacks have always tended to become more assimilated into white society. The statistics cited above indicate that blacks with college educations are least likely to favor church activism in social and political issues, with percentages very close to those of whites. Over the past quarter century though, since the development of the civil rights and black power movements, blacks have become increasingly skeptical about the possibilities of an integrated society and have indeed questioned whether or not it is desirable. Black pride has become an accepted manifestation of black culture, and blacks have become increasingly involved in the political process. I see the second and third models as complementary. The black church has historically functioned as the one organization completely under the control of blacks, and hence their principal training ground for activities of every kind. It has also sustained blacks as the major source of social cohesion both before and after slavery, and it has been the principal repository of black history. The black church has also supplied leadership both in politics and in the civil rights movement.

Certainly most black radicals and activists have emerged from these two models especially the last one. But even within each of these models a large measure of complexity must be recognized. Gayraud Wilmore has developed an analysis which detects both a survivalist and a liberationist tradition in black religion. He calls them strategies and responses to the reality of a dominating white world. To a certain extent the survivalist tradition can be traced through the slave churches and heterodox sects and cults of the early twentieth century, and to a Southern, rural and lower class milieu. In the North and in the major Southern cities the liberation tradition can be traced through the Free African Societies and independent congregations and is associated with the Northern, urban, aspiring middle class. But Wilmore also warns that this is too simplistic and that the two traditions have always been intertwined:

All we can say is that there are both separatists and integrationists in the broad spectrum of each tradition. The general direction of survivalists strategies inclines towards an indifference about interracial cooperation while keeping a friendly face, but with a stronger interest in self-help behind the scenes. The general direction of liberationist strategies is toward interracial cooperation, but with a radical disengagement from whites under certain conditions and a willingness to use secular politics rather than church-sponsored bootstrap operations to address the needs of the masses. We may speak of the former as conservative-separatist and the latter as progressive-integrationist, but such labels must be used cautiously and will not hold up in all historical contexts.<sup>69</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr. as Wilmore observes, personified both of these traditions which in his mind were subtly interpenetrated. This explains why King irritated conservative survivalists such as Joseph Jackson and much of the Southern clergy who thought he was too radical, while at the same time the more liberation oriented clergy of the North such as Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem and Nathan Wright of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, New Jersey questioned if King was realistic and tough enough to confront white racism in America.<sup>70</sup>

Mays and Nicholson recorded the sermon of one black preacher who said:

Regardless of where we may be, God almighty is able to take care of us. The Egyptians made the Israelites their servants and made them labor under hard task masters, and today the same thing that caused Israel to live under a hard task master

<sup>69</sup>Wilmore, p. 230.

<sup>70</sup>Wilmore, p. 233.



is causing you to live also under a hard task master. And this is sin. But I will tell you that God almighty always had a man to stand by his cause.<sup>71</sup>

This theme of deliverance, which is so basic to black faith, is certainly otherworldly and compensatory. It is otherworldly in the sense that it acknowledges that this world and this life are not ends, not the final measure of existence. It is compensatory in that it consoled blacks subjected to slavery and to the debilitating poverty and discrimination of life after emancipation. Of course Christianity, all forms of Christianity, is otherworldly and compensatory or it is not fully Christian. Furthermore, it does not always follow that the belief in a future state of happiness will necessarily lead to the acceptance of suffering in this world. We have seen how slave religion produced both docility and insurrection. It is more accurate to acknowledge that blacks accepted their status because they were realistic and understood the limits of their power, rather than because their Christianity convinced them of the inevitability of their fate.

The matter is complex because life is complex, and black religion was never far removed from black life. The Christian faith sustained blacks, saved them from despair, earned them integrity, and enabled them to carry on. It was essential to life and therefore ultimately this worldly. As one slave explained:

O missus! I could not hab-libbed had not been for de Lord—neber! Work so late, and so early; work so hard, when side ache so. Chil'en sold; old man gone. All visitors, and company in big house; all cooking and washing all on me, and neber done enough. Missus neber satisfied—no hope. Noting, noting but Jesus, I look up. O Lord! how long? Give me patience! patience! O Lord! Only Jesus know how bad I feel; darsn't tell any body, else get flogged. Darsn't call upon de Lord; darsn't tell when sick. But. . . I said Jesus, if it your will, I will bear it.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Mays and Nicholson, p. 78.

<sup>72</sup>*American Missionary* [ser. 2] 6 (June 1862): 138, quoted by Raboteau, p. 310.

## 5.

# Conclusion

**I**T WOULD BE A GOOD DEAL SIMPLER if it could be concluded that white and black religion were either completely the same or completely different. The truth, however, is more complex, for while both white and black religion in the South are interrelated parts of American Christianity and share a common genesis, at the same time they have developed within the context of the separation of the races in American society.

Using history, we have seen that black religion in the United States is essentially an American phenomenon, although African religion and culture has also played an important role. Afro-American religion, therefore, is a hybrid, a type often found in American culture. Most white religious groups also possess a dual cultural identity which could be described as Euro-American in origin. Both black and white religion originated in other hemispheres and cultures but both were profoundly influenced by the American environment. Black religion, indeed the whole black experience, was shaped, therefore, by the institution of slavery and by the institutionalization of racial segregation.

Most blacks in the western hemisphere are Catholics but most blacks in the United States are members of the evangelical Protestant family. This fact reveals the importance of the influence of the predominant white culture on the religion of blacks. In the antebellum South it was the evangelicals, particularly the Baptists and Methodists, who dominated religious life and they were the ones who evangelized the slaves, bringing them into their own churches. At the same time the invisible institution, the black church under slavery, developed its own dominant themes, which identified the black faith as something unique in American culture. The complexity of this white-black relationship can be noted by the fact that the development of black religion was the result of both a rejection by white religion and a rejection of white religion. In other words black religion, and especially the black church, developed independently of white religion because blacks were prohibited by white discrimination from sharing in the life of the white church, and also because blacks refused to accept a Christianity which condoned the enslavement of fellow Christians.

Because of the horrors of slavery and the systematic discrimination against blacks in American history, religion and particularly the black church were crucial to the lives of black Americans. Their faith often sustained blacks under the most trying of circumstances, while the church was the only institution completely under the control of blacks themselves. Therefore, the church often represented blacks' only source of social contact while it became their training ground for other skills. The leaders of the black community have consistently come out of the church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In the last decades of the twentieth century, as the most overt forms of racial discrimination have been eliminated and as greater opportunities have opened up for blacks, the role of the black church may change, in fact it may have already changed. For example, with the continued migration of blacks to large urban centers, and the opening up of state parks and other recreational facilities in the South to

Because the black religious experience was truly Christian yet encompassed so much of daily existence, it was both otherworldly and this worldly, traditional and radical. It was traditional in its embrace of orthodox Christianity and in its acceptance of the predominant form of American evangelical Protestantism. It was radical in its demand for change, in its recognition of the hypocrisy of white religion, and in its rejection of an ethos which claimed to be Christian but was at the same time racist. The genius of black religion is that it has managed to unite black aspirations with the evangelical Protestant ethos. It has accepted a white body but substituted a black soul.

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blacks, will the church continue to play such a crucial social role in the lives of black Americans? It is not the purpose of this essay to answer this type of question, if indeed it can be answered. However, the reader ought to be aware that the black church faces some new and difficult challenges which may eventually alter the traditional role that the church has played in the black community.

## Suggested Readings

There are a few classic works and some really fine new books available on black religion. I will mention just a few of these which I found particularly useful in the preparation of this essay.

There are many books written on slavery in the United States. The one which I found the most useful is Eugene F. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Vintage, 1972), which is written from the point of view of the slaves. The author is a Marxist, though one who believes that the church and religion played a crucial role in the life of the slaves. The combination is fascinating.

The best introductions to the invisible institution, religion under slavery, are Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1975). Chapter 5 of Donald G. Mathews' book *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1977) is also worth consulting. He is one of very few authors who treats both white and black religion in the same book. See the same author's article "Charles Colcock Jones and the Southern Evangelical Crusade to Form a Biracial Community," *The Journal of Southern History* 41 (August 1975): 299-320. On John Jasper see William Hatcher, *John Jasper, The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), a reprint of the 1908 publication.

The Herskóvits - Frazier controversy can be pursued firsthand in Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1964). Both of these authors and a good many more, such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, can be sampled in the valuable collection edited by Hart Nelsen et al., *Black Church in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1971). Also appropriate is the essay by Kelly Miller, "Radicals and Conservatives," first published in 1908 and reprinted in *Radicals and Conservatives and Other Essays on the Negro in America* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

There are two classic examinations of the black church: Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1972), first edition published in 1921, and Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), first published in 1933. Two more recent works are C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken, 1974) and Hart Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelsen, *Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 1975). Two new books, Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman, 1985), and Othal H. Lakey, *The History of the CME Church* (Memphis: The CME Publishing House, 1985) are highly recommended. The black church can be viewed from a biographical perspective through the two volumes by Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders: 1755-1940* and *Major Black Religious Leaders Since 1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977 and 1979).

The best introduction to black radicalism is Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), a revision and enlargement of the first edition published in 1973. On black theology James H. Cone's books are fundamental. They include *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969); *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970); and most recently *For My People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984). *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by Wilmore and Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) is very valuable. It is a collection of essays and statements, and includes an annotated bibliography.

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